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HEBREWS, GREEKS, AND ROMANS:

THE FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Timothy B. Shutt

KENYON COLLEGE

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Course Syllabus

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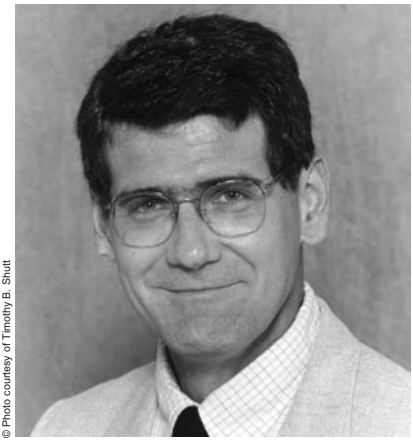

About Your Professor

Timothy B. Shutt

For more than twenty years, Professor Timothy Baker Shutt has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, literary tradition, and unwavering commitment to the liberal arts. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. Professor Shutt's courses in Kenyon's interdisciplinary Integrated Program in Humane Studies and in the Department of English alike are always heavily oversubscribed, and he lectures on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, the Greek historians, Virgil, and Dante every year to a packed house.

Shutt is a native of Ohio, raised in Michigan and schooled in Connecticut. During his high school years at the Hotchkiss School, he was honored as an All-American swimmer and devoted much of his time to drama. He majored in English as an undergraduate at Yale ('72). After three years at St. Mark's School of Texas, where he taught English and history and coached swimming, Shutt went on to graduate school in English, specializing in medieval literature and the history of ideas at the University of Virginia as a Du Pont Fellow. After earning his Ph.D. in 1984, Shutt spent two further years at Virginia as a Mellon Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and took a position at Kenyon in 1986, where he has taught happily ever since, deeply enjoying interaction with his students and the peaceful life of the Ohio countryside.

Shutt is a jovial extrovert and a polymath—a born teacher and lecturer—interested in nearly everything and everybody. In the Integrated Program in Humane Studies, he teaches literature, philosophy, history, art history, religious studies, and, at times, the history of science. He has written on military history, baseball, and birding in addition to his academic studies and gives regular talks at the Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon on migratory birds and on observational astronomy and the lore of the stars. He also works, when time permits, as a sports announcer for Kenyon football games, and for championship swimming meets nationwide, claiming longtime Detroit Tiger announcer Ernie Harwell as his inspiration. Shutt also travels regularly as a spokesperson for Kenyon, giving talks and lectures on behalf of the college from coast to coast. But his real vocation is reading and the classroom.

Introduction

Why study the foundations of Western civilization?

Our purpose in this course is to examine the foundations of Western civilization in antiquity. We will look at the cultures of the ancient Hebrews, of the ancient Greeks, and of the Romans, and we will likewise look at how their cultures interacted with each other, sometimes happily, sometimes not. In the process we will focus on how both the questions that they addressed and the answers that they found live among us and shape our lives to this very day. In a real sense, we are all of us, as participants in Western culture, Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans still.

We will for the most part be paying attention to events taking place and ideas coming to birth in the Mediterranean basin, the fundamental homeland or "cultural hearth" of Western civilization, from about 1200 BCE, before the Common Era, to about 600 CE: that is to say, from about the time of the events memorialized as the Trojan War and the Exodus to the end of antiquity, when the Western Roman Empire, if not the Eastern, was a cherished memory, but little more.

Over the course of 1800-odd years a sort of common Mediterranean culture developed, and in their own ways, the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans each contributed to it. That does not mean that in, for example, the year 200 CE, a Jew in the great Egyptian metropolis of Alexandria, a Greek in Byzantium, and a Roman in Rome itself would have lived exactly the same way or held exactly the same values. It does mean, though, that each would have felt himself or herself affected to some degree at least by the cultural values of the others, and all the more so as Christianity gradually gained adherents, since Christianity itself bears the imprint of Hebrew, Greek, and Roman cultures. You can think of the process as being something like a great river system, the Romans as the Mississippi, pretty small when it starts in Minnesota, much bigger after it joins with the Ohio or the Greeks, and bigger still when it joins the Missouri or the Hebrews, the longest and oldest of them all.

All this raises a question, though, and a question of ever more pertinence as not only the United States, but to greater or lesser degree, all Western countries become increasingly diverse. Why study the foundations of Western civilization, as opposed to the foundations of other civilizations; Japanese, Inca, or Hausa as the case may be? And several answers can be given.

First of all, for good or for ill, the huge majority of those who are likely to listen to these lectures, or to read these words, live themselves within Western culture, and studying the foundations of Western culture is accordingly a way of coming to know better not only where we come from, but who we are.

Second, the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, both in their lives and in their writings, wrestled with questions that none of us can avoid. How should we live? Does the world finally make sense, or are things finally and irrevocably random? Where are we going and what is our purpose? How much can we hope for? In this world and (perhaps) in the next?

And third, there is the sheer interest of the story, and an interesting story it is.

Lecture 1:
Overview and Backgrounds

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Genesis and I & II Samuel (Bible, Revised Standard Version).

Introduction

What distinguishes Western civilization (or civilizations) from other civilizations? The best way to answer this question, perhaps, is to look at the most distinctive contributions of the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans one after the other, the values that were important to them, and that are valuable to us still. Let's start with the Hebrews.

I. Contributions of the Hebrews

A. Religious Sensibility

What the Hebrews contributed above all was their religious sensibility, and most importantly, perhaps, a rigorous sense of monotheism. Monotheism is the religious idea that there is but one God: Yahweh, or Elohim (the latter form is, surprisingly, plural), creator of the world and source and guardian of righteousness.

B. The Hebrews also contributed their religious ethic of righteousness and of compassion. Our own sense of ethics has been so powerfully shaped by this Hebrew, and later Christian and Islamic idea, that it is hard for us to imagine what else an ethical vision could consist of. If kindness, compassion, and righteousness are not virtues, then what could virtue possibly be?

C. Likewise, the Hebrews contributed their sense of history. This sense too is now so ingrained in us that it is hard to imagine things ever having been otherwise. But for the Greeks, as for most ancient cultures, history was more or less meaningless. The world had always been, the world would always be, and on the most profound level, things pretty much stayed as they were, moving at best in cycles, like the cycle of the seasons.

D. Finally, the Hebrews were influential in their emphasis on the Torah, the Law, and accordingly in their emphasis on literacy. Literacy was important to the Hebrews, and as a result they enjoyed as a group what was very probably the highest literacy rate in the ancient world.

II. Contributions of the Greeks

A. Systematic Rationality

The Greeks too were profoundly influential, and if our religious life, or even, paradoxically our more or less irreligious life, bears the imprint of the Hebrews, so our intellectual life, to comparable depth, bears the imprint of the Greeks.

B. What then were the specific contributions of the Greeks? They are, in fact, almost too many to name.

1. First, perhaps, the Greeks were the first on record to have considered the process of thinking itself. One result was the formalization of logic, the study of what makes a good argument.
2. Another was the first steps toward a formalization of mathematics, particularly geometry, considered in the abstract.
3. Yet another was the development of philosophy, the "love of wisdom" according to the meaning of the Greek words *philos* and *sophia*, from which the term was coined, and of philosophy in many guises. The Greeks thought about "epistemology," how we know what we know; about "ontology," how things came to be and continue in being, and what "being" is or means.
4. They thought about the fundamental origins and nature of things, "metaphysics," or what lies beyond or gives rise to *phusis*, or *physis*, the physical world that lies before us.
5. And of course they thought about ethics, how we can best live our brief but important lives.
6. Again, and right from the start, the Greeks were interested in science, in the systematic rational effort to make sense of the natural world, and no Greek bequest, perhaps, has proven more durable and more powerful.

C. In the arts, the contributions of the Greeks were no less profound.

1. The Homeric epics, which we will later discuss in more detail, are foundation texts of Western culture, and the Greeks, in particular the Athenians, more or less invented what we know today as drama.
2. In the visual arts, they were by something close to common consensus unsurpassed. Greek sculpture, by the fifth century, had established a realism, a practical mastery of the human form, which was absolutely unprecedented, a breathtaking quantum jump to an entirely new level of observational accuracy and skill. And Greek architecture too has maintained its influence to the present day.

D. Each of these achievements speaks in its own way of the Greeks' fundamental attitude toward the world, which is very much with us to this day; more, indeed, in some respects at least, than may be entirely comfortable for us. For the vision of the Greeks was a profoundly human-centered vision, as opposed to, say, the Hebrews, whose vision was by contrast God-centered.

1. This human-centered vision finds reflection in the Greek gods, for the Greek gods, too, were conceived in human terms, not as unimaginably more powerful, wiser, and better than we are—as an altogether different order of being—but basically more glorious and beautiful, stronger, and immortal human beings. With the ability, in fact, to father or bear half-human and half-divine children. And humans themselves could be god-like, and in Homer are often

referred to as god-like. Even in our own day, everyone has had the experience of seeing someone do something surpassingly, unbelievably well. The Greeks cherished such moments—that was when people were *most* god-like, and they deliberately set up occasions in which such moments were likely to occur. The Greeks, in fact, invented sports as we know them, and some of the oldest and best surviving poems in Greek are celebrations of Olympic victors. Even the decision as to who could stage plays in Athens, or who received contracts for publically funded art, was made through contest. The Greek word for contest is *agon*, from which comes our own word "agony." Sometimes competing is not fun. But the result can also be glorious, can be, to use the Greek term, an expression of *arete*, or "excellence," or, from a Greek perspective, of "virtue." Excellence and virtue of such surpassing and astonishing quality is the sort that can take our breath away and make us seem like demigods. This exuberance makes us reconsider the limits of human achievement, and drives us to exceed those limits.

2. Such a competitive ethic leads to certain problems—everybody is not a winner and the Greeks tried to deal with the tensions resulting from the competitive individualism that was so much a part of their culture, among other means, by systematizing the study of politics. Political science too begins in Greece, as does, of course, democracy. But when politics failed, as they often did, the Greeks resorted enthusiastically to war.

3. Greek citizen armies fought shoulder to shoulder and decisively and finally destroyed Greek independence in the process. The Greek-speaking mercenary armies that succeeded them lost none of their forbearer's ferocity. Under the leadership of Alexander of Macedon they conquered not only the Greek world, but Egypt, the Near East, and the Persian Empire as well, spreading the Greek language and culture as they went.

III. The Contributions of the Romans

A. Practicality, Organization, and Order

What, then, of the Romans, a culture deeply pious in its own way, but certainly without anything resembling the fierce and focused piety of the Hebrews, and likewise without the glittering, multifaceted individualistic brilliance of the Greeks? What did they contribute to the mix? In short, they made things run. Hebrew history is in large part a chronicle of threats and disasters, and the Greeks, in a sense, finally inflicted disaster upon themselves by dint of ferocious fratricidal warfare. The Romans fared better, and their record is in fact one of, on the whole, unbroken success for the better part of a thousand years. The Roman genius, then, was above all a genius for orderly practicality. They knew how to build, they knew how to fight, and they knew how to keep what they had fought for.

B. The Roman army, an astonishing institution in its own right, was for centuries simply unbeatable fighting anywhere other than in deep forests or

the open plains. The secret was Roman training and discipline. By the first century CE, the army was professional, long-service, and in large part open to merit. The highest officers were political figures, but the mid-level officers and NCOs, the folks who ran the army day-to-day and set the example in a fight, all without exception rose from the ranks over the course of a near-lifetime of service. The army trained hard, worked hard, moved slowly and carefully, and as a rule—and as a result—ordinarily overcame vastly larger forces with minimal casualties and with ease. That was what the Romans expected, and that was what they generally achieved. The secret here as well was order and discipline, codified finally and brilliantly in Roman law.

C. Roman law was not finally and fully codified until the very end of the Roman empire during the reign or "*imperium*" of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, who ruled from what is now Istanbul from 527 to 565 CE. But the Justinian code drew upon centuries of precedent and careful legal thought, and it laid the groundwork for the legal system of Mediterranean Europe and powerfully influenced the development of English Common Law as well. More influential still, perhaps, is the simple notion that society should be governed by law, that law is the foundation of an orderly and just society. And this is clearly a notion much at work in our own world.

D. The Romans, unsurprisingly, had their own ethical vision as well, and an ethical vision that in some respects stood in contrast to the ethics of the Greeks and Hebrews alike. Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's great epic about the founding of Rome (which we shall take a closer look at in lectures ten and eleven) is a man notable for "*pietas*," the etymological root of our word "piety." But the *pietas* of Aeneas is not exactly piety in our own sense. Rather, it is something more like "respect for the way things are supposed to be," "respect for duty," if you will. This includes respect for the gods, but it is not confined to respect for the gods. It includes as well respect for country, for family, for custom, for the whole array of duties and expectations that go with any position in society.

E. The Roman focus is on duty, on discipline, on measured and sensible self-control. This is, perhaps, not so inspiring a conception of good behavior as Hebrew compassion and devotion to God or as Greek commitment to the pursuit of achievement and excellence. But it is profoundly useful and makes, without question, for notably stable and productive societies; and no society can do without it for very long.

F. Finally, the Romans have left to us their concern for and expertise in technology.

The Romans seemed to have regarded theory with some of the suspicion of the engineer, or indeed, of the hands-on tool and die worker. They were interested in what worked. The excellence and durability of their roads and waterworks are almost as famous as the excellence and durability of their laws. And both are devoted to the same end—making society run as smoothly and efficiently as it can. They had less use for fine talk, though of course they produced their share of it. In this regard one of the most telling triumphs of Roman technology is

the perfection of concrete, a cheap and humble substance whose only virtues are that it *is* cheap and easily made and that, once dry, it lasts for centuries. Not particularly pretty, no, but if you are in the business, say, of constructing aqueducts and ensuring a safe and plentiful water supply, then perhaps prettiness is not so important.

G. In lines that are among the most famous in *The Aeneid*, Virgil freely concedes the superiority of Greek culture in a wide variety of intellectual and artistic endeavors. He concludes, though, with an exhortation to the Romans. In Robert Fitzgerald's translation:

> Roman, remember by your strength to rule
>
> Earth's peoples, for your arts are to be these
>
> To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
>
> To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.

As Virgil himself was well aware, the Romans were no more successful in fully living up to these ideals than any other culture has been in living up to what its better angels valued most. But that said, they did very well, and did so for a very long time. Indeed, and in many respects, we are Romans still.

IV. Beginning the Story: What Was Going on Before Western Civilization Began?

A. Patterns in Prehistory

Just as the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans laid the foundations of Western culture, so too did they have predecessors, and though it lies outside the purview of this course to devote too much time to those predecessors, a little information may be appropriate to give a sense of where the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans themselves were coming from.

B. The Peopling of Europe and the Mediterranean Basin

Modern humans, so we are told, first developed in Africa, most likely in East Africa, somewhere between what is now Mozambique and Ethiopia or the southern Sudan—and developed surprisingly recently according to DNA analysis, 120,000 years ago or maybe even less, according to the latest estimates. Regardless of the true date, the decisive change or set of changes leading to the development of *Homo sapiens* took place during the Ice Ages, when climates were unstable, and for the most part significantly colder than they are now. East Africa and much of what is now the Sahara were supposedly savannah land not unlike much of Kenya and Tanzania today. Further north, of course, it was colder, and the ice-free portion of Europe was inhabited by the strong and stocky and admirably cold-adapted Neandertals (or Neanderthals).

Whether because of the sudden full development of language on the part of humans or for other reasons, within a few thousand years the last Neandertals were gone. They evidently held on longest in what is now southern Spain in caves facing the Mediterranean and Africa

which, without boats, they evidently never reached. Meanwhile, or shortly thereafter, the climate was moderating, not only in Europe, but worldwide. Somewhere in the Middle East, by all accounts, agriculture began with native grains, emmer wheat and barley, and generation by generation made its way westward. By 8000 BCE in the Middle East, at least, there were not only farms, but villages, indeed small cities. The foundations were laid, not only for Western culture, but at slightly different times and in different places, for the culture of Southeast Asia, of India, of China, and ultimately of Mexico and Central America and the high Andes as well.

C. Sumer, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia

1. The Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, then, were by no means the first in the line so far as developing what we think of as civilization, not even in their own region. Early farmers were succeeded by a series of more or less urban civilizations in Mesopotamia, the land between (and around) the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, in what is now Iraq. First among them it seems was Sumer, a culture that makes its appearance around 4500 BCE and which lasted in one guise or another for the better part of 2500 years, with cities—Eridu, Uruk, and Ur—among others, not too far from what is now Basra on the Persian Gulf. Starting about in 3300, the Sumerians developed a form of writing, inscribing wedge-shaped marks with a stylus—a "cuneus" in Latin, into clay tablets, a mode of writing, "cunieform," later adopted by many of their successors in the ancient Middle East. The earliest versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* likewise seem to stem from Sumer, and *Gilgamesh* too was refined and adopted by many of the Sumerians' cultural heirs, and appears, indeed, to have most notably left its mark on the story of Noah in the Hebrew Bible.
2. Sumer was succeeded by Babylon, further north on the banks of the Euphrates, and beyond question one of the great cities of antiquity, home of the celebrated law-giver, Hammurapi (or Hammurabi), in the mid-1700s, and notable for astronomical observation. Astrology and astronomy alike make their appearance here, and to this day many large and prominent constellation groupings go back to the time of Babylon. Babylonian mathematics proved likewise influential, and circles of 360 degrees and hours of 60 minutes testify to the durability of their base-60 numerical system.
3. Babylon, in its turn, gave way at last to Assyria, a ferociously expansionist chariot-based military power from further north still. Accounts of Assyrian sackings and conquests under the likes of such rulers as Tiglath-Pilaser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib make for disquieting reading; they were not gentle by any stretch of the imagination, and as we will see, they loom large as a terrifying threat to the Hebrews after the time of David and Solomon.
4. The Assyrians fell suddenly in their turn in 605 to a revivified Babylon, with the assistance of the Medes from the mountains to the north and Babylon in its turn sacked Jerusalem twice, in 597 and more thoroughly and completely in 587, destroying the Temple of Solomon. Then the

Babylonians too fell, to Persia under the inspired leadership of Cyrus—in Persian, "Koresh," a name since adopted by others with more or less messianic aspirations—who allowed the deported Hebrew leaders in Babylon to return to their homeland in Israel. About the Persians, Cyrus and his successors Darius and Xerxes, we will in fact hear a good deal more, not only in discussing the Hebrews, but in discussing their later wars against the Greeks.

D. Egypt

1. Which brings us to the last, the most long-lasting, and arguably the most influential of the cultures laying the groundwork upon which the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans built, *Aegypta aeterna*, eternal Egypt, on the banks and delta of the River Nile.
2. Agriculture, so we are told, began a bit later in Egypt than in the lands to the northeast. By 4000 BCE, though, agriculture was firmly established, and by about 3100 Egypt was unified; Upper Egypt, that is, upstream, to the south, and Lower Egypt falling under the control of a ruler named Narmer. The great pyramids at Giza, near modern Cairo, date from what is termed the "Old Kingdom," the greatest of them, built by the pharaoh Khufu, completed about 2530. The "Middle Kingdom," from about 2040 to 1640, and the "New Kingdom," from about 1550 to 1070, followed in turn, separated by periods of what was for Egypt uncharacteristic political turmoil.
3. The New Kingdom is of particular importance to our story, in large part because it was the New Kingdom with whom the ancient Hebrews made contact and interacted. From 1352 to 1336, the pharaoh Akhenaten reigned and sponsored a top-down religious revolution, contesting the hegemony of the traditional Egyptian pantheon and elevating "Aten" his sun god to the position of supreme deity. Some have seen in Akhenaten's attempted reforms the roots of Hebrew monotheism. In Egypt, though, the revolution failed and came to an abrupt end with his death. One of his less distinguished successors, Tutankhamun, has gained fame in posterity since his has been the only Egyptian tomb discovered in modern times unrobbed and full of lavish grave goods. A far more capable successor, though, was Ramses II, who in the course of a very long reign of sixty-six years (1279–1213) may have dealt, among other matters, with the recalcitrant *Apriu* or Hebrews.
4. Thereafter, the Egyptians once again faced difficulties. For reasons that are still contested, not just Egypt but the whole eastern Mediterranean world entered a time of crisis around 1200. The Egyptians themselves speak of their trouble with the "Sea Peoples," and they were by no means alone in their problems. At the same time the empire of the Hittites, over six hundred years old and inhabiting what is now central Turkey, collapsed. So too began the first round of urban civilization in what is now Greece. There is in fact little consensus as to exactly who these "Sea People" were. Some have proposed relatives of the Phoenecians and Philistines of biblical fame, who were certainly capable mariners. Others have

proposed the Greeks themselves, or in any case, a new and fierce wave of Greeks.

5. Egypt survived and recovered, but was never again as powerful as it had been in the days of Ramses II. In the 600s Egypt was conquered by the Assyrians; in 525 it was conquered by Persia, and in 332 it was conquered by Alexander of Macedon, Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death in 323, his generals divided up his empire between them, and the resulting Greek-speaking dynasty, the Ptolemies, reigned in Egypt, making use of Alexandria, the splendid port city that Alexander founded, until the last of them, Cleopatra, was defeated by Caesar Augustus in 31 BCE, and Egypt became part of the Roman empire.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was distinctive about the Hebrews' vision of God?
2. In what ways were Greek ideas about ethics and concepts of proper behavior different from Hebrew ideas about ethics?
3. What made the Romans more effective as rulers than either the Hebrews or the Greeks?
4. What Hebrew ideas and ideals, Greek ideas and ideals, and Roman ideas and ideals are most influential today?

Suggested Reading

Alfoldy, Geza. *The Social History of Rome*. Trans. Frank Pollock and David Braund. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Cahill, Thomas. *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. New York: Knopf Publishing, 1999.

Clough, Arthur Hugh, ed. *Plutarch: Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*. Volumes I & II. Trans. John Dryden. New York: The Modern Library, Penguin USA, 1992.

Freeman, Charles. *Greek Achievement: The Foundation of the Western World*. New York: Penguin USA, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Freeman, Charles. *Egypt, Greece and Rome: Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Lecture 2:
The Hebrew Bible:
Overview and Genesis

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Genesis and I & II Samuel (Bible, Revised Standard Version).

Introduction

In a sense, the Hebrew Bible is not so much a book as a library. It includes, as *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* notes, "prose and poetry, myth and legend, folk tale and history, sacred hymns and a superb love song, religious and secular laws, proverbs of the wise and oracles of the prophets, epic poems, laments, parables, and allegories" (xxv)—all gathered together, edited, and redacted in a process spanning centuries to express the relationship between the Hebrews and their God and to express, insofar as such a thing is possible to human minds and human speech, the very nature of God himself.

To talk in human terms about the process by which the Hebrew Bible came to be, how and when it was written, and how and when the various writings found their place within it, we will have to talk about the history of the ancient Hebrews as well. Once we have done that, we will move on to discussing the themes and books within the Bible, which have done so much to ensure that no other text has had a greater impact in shaping our thoughts and our values to this very day.

I. Historical Background, Composition, and Redaction of the Biblical Text

A. Many of the oral traditions reflected in Genesis and elsewhere go back to very early times. Traditions about a great flood, for instance, appear throughout the Middle East, and beyond, in Greece, and date to a time long before there is any record of the Hebrews. In Genesis 12, though, most scholars see a sort of break in the narrative. Up to that point, Genesis has mostly chronicled sacred myths and legends. These are immensely important to posterity, including ourselves, but they are on the whole more stories about why things are the way they are, what are called "etiological" stories about the causes of things, *aitia* in Greek, which means more nearly "cause" than stories, about what happened to this or that individual person at this or that time and place. With the story of Abraham and his family, that convention is slightly altered. Abraham was evidently a real person in the sense that you and I are real people.

He is said to have come from a real and quite specific place, "Ur of the Chaldeans," the old Sumerian city north of the Persian Gulf that we mentioned in the last lecture (Gen. 11:31). He is said to have migrated with his entire household from Ur to the land of Canaan, an event that can be dated to some time relatively early in the second millennium BCE, 1850 or thereabouts. The descent into Egypt associated with the

stories of Joseph can be dated about a century and a half later, about 1700 BCE. And the decisive event, the event that more than any other formed Israel as a nation, the miraculous flight from Egypt under Moses, seems to have happened about 1250 BCE. And miraculous it seemed, even at the time. It is telling that on linguistic grounds one of the oldest passages in the Bible appears to be the "Song of Miriam": "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex. 15:21). There are scholars who believe that the Song of Miriam is more or less what it purports to be, an eyewitness account. Be that as it may, the sense that God had intervened decisively, astoundingly, beyond all rational expectation, on behalf of his chosen people while they were threatened has shaped Hebrew culture ever since.

B. Even in the land of Israel, though, the Hebrews found themselves in a chronically dangerous situation, between Egypt on the one hand and the Mesopotamian powers on the other, with the Canaanites right next door. In response to this sea of troubles, ancient Israel turned somewhat reluctantly—the story appears in the two books of Samuel—to the institution of kingship, first to Saul, and then to David and Solomon. And these, particularly the reigns of David and Solomon, were the glory days. David succeeded in uniting the twelve (traditionally) tribes of Israel and establishing a capital on neutral ground in Jerusalem about 1000 BCE. His son Solomon built the first Temple there and reigned well into the last third of the 900s. At his death, however, a succession dispute led to the fragmentation of the Davidic kingdom.

   This is the historical context in which much of the Hebrew Bible was composed, and in one way or another, the Bible reflects the turmoil of those unsettled and violent times. The task of tracing the various texts and traditions that make up the Bible was most compellingly undertaken by scholars in nineteenth-century Germany, which boasted, at that time, the most advanced and effective university system in the world. Their motives in teasing out the various strands of biblical narrative, legislation, and prophecy were as often rationalistic and secular as devotional and religious, but their scholarship, in large part conducted on linguistic grounds, was as rigorous and painstaking as they could make it, and many of their conclusions have remained persuasive.

   On their reading, by the mid-fifth century, 458 or thereabouts, the Torah reached its present form under the hands of pious and skillful redactors eager to preserve sacred tradition in all its richness and variety. Other works later found inclusion in the wider Hebrew Bible—in 458, indeed, some were not even yet written—but the Torah remains the living heart of the Hebrew tradition with every letter a part of the unsayable divine name. Here, as in the later formation of the Christian Bible, the process of canon formation, the process by which various works and writings were selected for inclusion in the Bible, was gradual, and some texts, some books, came to be more central, more highly valued, than others.

II. Thematic Overview: Genesis

A. The Problem—Things Aren't Right

1. Genesis offers two accounts of the creation. It opens with the Priestly account, which is distinctive and important in suggesting, though not quite stating, that God created the world out of nothing, *e nihilo*, as the Latin tag goes. The Earth, we are told, was "without form and void" (1:2) and "God said 'Let there be light': and there was light" (1:3). God creates by means of speaking. He uses the Greek word *logos*, which implies from a Hebrew perspective as well as a Greek one that the world is fundamentally ordered, one might say "logos-ical" or logical, as a reflection not only of divine speech, but of divine thought. And humans, according to the Priestly account, are created, male and female alike, in the divine image.
2. The early Yahwistic account, or "J," gives a considerably more earthy account of human origins. Adam, on this view, begins quite literally as a mudball, formed, we are told "of dust from the ground" (2:7), and Eve is later formed from one of Adam's ribs (2:21–22). And in this account, they fall, eating of the forbidden "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:16) in the hope of becoming "like God" (3:5). This is where we get the definitive statement of the problems that the Hebrew Bible seeks to address. The Fall, in a sense, sets the moral and psychological groundwork for everything that follows, the etiological or "just so" story par excellence. For we live in a world full of problems, and the Fall encodes, in narrative terms, pretty much all of them.
3. First of all, Adam and Eve fall by eating of the "tree of knowledge." They are told beforehand that if they eat of it, they will die. But they don't. Or not right away. Instead, what Adam and Eve gain is knowledge by eating the forbidden fruit—knowledge that they will die. And this is a distinctly human predicament. All living things die, of course, but so far as we know, only humans are aware of the fact beforehand, maybe aware of it at all.

   And the tree of knowledge has other resonances. My own guess is that it is, among other things, a way of talking about self-consciousness itself, which in an odd way separates us from nature and from the natural order, and can even separate us from ourselves. In our easiest, happiest states, we are simply doing what we are doing—working, playing, loving, talking, or whatever. We are not thinking about it—we are just doing, just being. Self-consciousness can alienate us from ourselves; we can, and sometimes do, watch ourselves with disgusted disapproval, and self-consciousness, which, in the very nature of the case, sets us apart from our surroundings, whatever at the moment those surroundings may be. Or in some cases, we are simply bored. For boredom is, in effect, simply excess self-consciousness—an annoying awareness of *not* being swept up in the moment.
4. The tree of knowledge, in this sense at least, bears bitter fruit. But the fruits of the fall, sad to say, or the problems encoded in the story, go way beyond alienation and self-consciousness. They also include our

fallibility, our propensity to violence, and the fact that will-power is generally not enough, and that we don't always do, even can't always do, what we want to or think we should.

5. As the saying goes, you can't be rich enough. Or capable enough. Or attractive enough. And to top it all off, we can only live, all animals can only live, by consuming other living or once-living creatures. And even plants compete for water, light, and space. We live surrounded by competitive predation, and we know in the end we'll lose. In light of such difficulties, why even bother?

   That is the problem the Hebrew Bible seeks to address.

B. The Beginnings of an Answer

The Bible proposes an answer, in fact a whole a series of answers, each in a sense further-reaching than those that went before. All of them, to greater or lesser degree, center upon the notion of *"berith"* or "covenant." A covenant is an agreement, not unlike a contract, or treaty, or loyalty oath, between a greater person or power and a lesser person or power, ordinarily outlining the services and loyalties expected by the greater in return for benefits bestowed to the lesser.

1. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden serve in a sense under an implied covenant. They may live, prosper, and remain in the Garden so long as they don't eat the forbidden fruit. After their expulsion from the Garden, the expectations under which their descendants live are not formalized by explicit agreements or commands, though the biblical account very clearly suggests that God still has and still enforces expectations for human behavior.
2. So much so, in fact, that at the time of Noah, we are told that God very nearly gives up in disgust at the whole human project. As the "J" account puts it: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth," and indeed determines "to make an end of all flesh" (6:5–6, 13). Noah and his family alone, and the various animals safe in his ark, survive God's wrath. At the end, though, God reconsiders and offers the rainbow as a token of the first covenant explicitly so called. It is an unusual covenant in that no particular actions are called for on the part of human beings to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh" (9:15).
3. God's ethical expectations still hold. We advance only two chapters before the Tower of Babel gives offense, and humans are cursed with the diversity of languages that helps to make mutual understanding so difficult, and which makes the attainment of the "knowledge" that Adam and Eve sought that much more difficult. But the punishment this time falls short of even the prospect of universal annihilation.

C. Abraham and the Call—the Answer, Phase II

1. All of the covenants seen so far, both explicit and implied, have applied to everybody, or at least, in the case of Adam and Eve, to

everybody who's around. With the call of Abraham, that changes. It is as if God has decided to work in a new way. Rather than calling upon all humanity, he calls a single nation or family, indeed, at the beginning, he calls upon a single man.

2. The story begins in Genesis 12: "the Lord said to Abram" (whose name will only later be changed to Abraham in testimony to his covenant), "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing," and "by you all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:1–3).
3. Abraham obeys, and once arrived in the promised land of Canaan, God promises him, in old age, an heir, and makes the covenant between them explicit. Abraham, as we may now call him, is to "be blameless" (17:1), and God speaks to him in the following terms: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants," all "the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (17:7–8). Besides fidelity and "blamelessness," there is a further stipulation. Abraham and all his male descendants are to be circumcised, an odd request on the face of it, though the custom was reputedly common in Egypt, and represents, as I take it, not only a physical token of allegiance, but also the unimpeded flow of fertility that will lead to Abraham's becoming "a great nation."
4. Abraham's obedience and allegiance are shortly put severely to the test when in one of the most famous, most perplexing, and most decisive passages in the Bible, he is called upon to sacrifice Isaac, the promised heir through whom God's covenant with Abraham is to be fulfilled. "Here am I," says Abraham once again, in willing response to God's call, and faithfully sets about obeying the dreadful command whose fulfillment will by all human calculation result in the voiding of the promise and the extinction of all his hopes. He and Isaac travel to Mount Moriah, by later tradition the site of the Temple, or according to at least some Christian commentators, the nearby site of Golgotha, where Isaac is not sacrificed after all, and Abraham's faith and obedience are triumphantly justified, and the covenant is confirmed.
5. The remainder of Genesis chronicles the later life of Isaac, of his wife Rebecca and her twin sons, the woolly Esau and the wily Jacob, who wrestles, so we are told, with God, and gains in the contest the new name "Israel," and finally the sons of Israel, most particularly Joseph, the son of Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, whose adventures in Egypt set the stage for the definitive formulation of the covenant of Moses in Exodus.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What enduring human ills, according to Genesis, are consequences of the Fall of Adam and Eve?
2. What is a covenant?
3. Abraham is often considered the founder of Judaism. What arguments can be advanced in support of this position?

Suggested Reading

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Lecture 3:
The Hebrew Bible:
Exodus, David, the Prophets, and Job

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Exodus, Joshua, and Job (Bible, Revised Standard Version).

Introduction

In our last lecture we discussed the progressive formulation of the covenants between God and Noah, between God and Abraham, and between God and the children of Israel. In Exodus we find the Covenant formulated for the children of Israel in definitive form.

I. Exodus and the Mosaic Covenant: The Answer, Phase III

A. The story begins with Moses, a Hebrew raised as an Egyptian by the Pharaoh's daughter, in fact, thanks to the cunning of his mother and his sister, who set Moses afloat in a "basket made of bulrushes" to circumvent the Pharaoh's decree that all male Hebrew children are to be cast into the Nile. Only as an adult, according to Exodus, does Moses—the name itself is Egyptian—come to identify with his Hebrew heritage, when he sees an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew. He kills the Egyptian in response and flees to the desert.

B. And it is in the desert, in the wilderness, that he receives his call in one of the most powerful and numinous passages in the Bible. Moses is alone, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, when he sees a burning bush. He approaches and hears the voice of God and he responds as did Abraham before him: "Here am I" (3:4). God then tells him "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry," and "have come down to deliver them" (3:7–8), and lays upon Moses a daunting task. "I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people" (3:10). Moses, understandably enough, is not sure he is up to the job, and asks who it is that sends him. God replies, "I am who I am," thus revealing the unsayable divine name and in the lapidary, recursive terseness of his response, suggesting a great deal about the divine nature, about who and what God is (3:14).

C. Moses goes on to confront the Pharaoh, and when the Pharaoh proves resistant, calls down upon Egypt the ten plagues, culminating in the death of the first-born (an echo both of once customary sacrificial rites and the fate that Moses himself escaped as an infant). The Hebrews are spared in the first Passover, cross the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds, through God's intervention miraculously escape the pursuing chariots of the Pharaoh—"the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex. 15:21)—and journey onward into the wilderness on their way to the promised land of Canaan. This is, as we suggested in our last lecture, the decisive moment in the foundation of Israel; here is confirmed the sense of chosenness and of mission that has guided Israel for over three thousand years.

D. And it is, once again, in the wilderness, at Sinai, that the Covenant receives its definitive formulation. The heart of the Covenant is, of course, enshrined in the Ten Commandments, governing the relation of the children of Israel both to God and to each other, and governing not only actions, but in the tenth commandment, "you shall not covet" (20:17), interior dispositions of heart as well. But the Covenant is in fact a good deal more detailed than that. It encompasses all of the law, the Torah, not just ten commandments, but traditionally, 613 commandments—ritual laws, dietary laws, laws of purity, of humanity, and of compassion. If the children of Israel obey them, they will prosper. They will find blessing in the land of promise, the Lord will be their God. But the covenant is conditional; if they do not obey, they will bear the brunt of divine wrath.

II. Joshua, David, and Solomon

The book of Joshua recounts (and so archaeologists suggest, to some degree misrepresents) the harsh Israelite conquest of Canaan, and the book of Judges chronicles the unsettled times that followed. In 1 and 2 Samuel, we read of the fulfillment of the promise with the foundation of the Davidic kingdom of Israel, of David's decision to bring the Ark of the Covenant, repository of the tablets of the Law, and token of God's special favor and presence, to his new capital city of Jerusalem, and of the turbulent course of David's reign. And in 1 Kings we read of Solomon and the construction of the temple in which the Ark of the Covenant was finally enshrined. Thereafter, though, we enter a new phase in the history of Israel. From the perspective of the biblical writers, God has thoroughly kept his promise. The Israelites, however, increasingly begin to default on theirs. After Solomon, the kingdom is divided, Israel in the north and Judah, centered on Jerusalem in the south, and devotion to the Covenant begins to waver as the Hebrews, to use the pungent biblical language, begin "to whore after strange gods."

III. The Prophets

Hence the role of the prophets, who speak out with increasing urgency against the moral failings and unfaithfulness of their contemporaries and predict vengeance and disaster unless they repent and devote themselves again to God's law. So Amos appeared about 750, as did the writer of the first portion of the book of Isaiah, beginning about 740, as both Israel and Judah were menaced by Assyria, and as in 721 the northern kingdom fell. Then came, perhaps above all, Jeremiah, who prophesied and witnessed the capture of Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon, after which the Temple was destroyed and a great many of the surviving Hebrews were deported, evidently most of the priests and leaders among them (though not, as it happened, Jeremiah).

IV. Job, ca. 560–540: The Answer, Phase IV

A. The destruction of Jerusalem, and all the more so, the destruction of the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant itself, seems, understandably enough, to have provoked a religious crisis. If some of the children of

Israel had proved unfaithful, others surely had not, fulfilling the injunctions of the Covenant from beginning to end.

B. How then, why then, had Jerusalem fallen and justly and unjustly suffered? And how if God was who the Hebrews believed, lover of righteousness and ruler of all nations, could He have allowed not only the destruction of Judah and the exile of his people, but the destruction of his own temple and even the ark and tablets within?

C. In the face of such events, the most obvious answer, to be blunt, is that God is not who the Hebrews thought he was; in fact, it may well be that there is no God at all. In that day, as in our own, in response to at least equally horrific events, there were doubtless many who came to such conclusions. What is more surprising is that many did not. And indeed, as Ezekiel 37 suggests, the "dry bones" of Israel were in fact revived, and in the words of what is termed "second" Isaiah, "in the wilderness" the "way of the Lord" was made straight, and the "iniquity" of Jerusalem pardoned (40:2–3), as Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed those Hebrews who wished to do so to return home. Even in the most hopeless days of the Babylonian exile, though, another answer seems to have been possible, and we find it formulated most powerfully, if not, perhaps, most clearly in the book of Job.

D. The story of Job seems ultimately to have been a Middle Eastern folktale, many centuries old already at the time the composer of the book of Job, as we have it, turned it to his own theological purposes. The man who has all, loses all, and regains all as a result of a sort of divine *jeu d'esprit* seems to have been part of the theological landscape, recast in Hebrew, evidently during the days of the Davidic kingdom or shortly thereafter. The composer of Job, however, writing centuries later, uses this tale to pose his own probing and terrifying questions.

E. The implied promise of every divine covenant since Noah had been, in essense, simple—obey and prosper. What happens when you have obeyed, done everything you could to do things right, and you don't prosper? What then? Is the deal off? Have you been deluding yourself? Was there ever a deal in the first place? That is Job's question.

F. And his friends have an answer. Job must be mistaken about his virtues. If he is suffering—and he is—then it must be because he has done something wrong. God simply does not afflict people for no reason whatsoever; people suffer because they deserve to suffer. Job, however, insists that in his own case at least, they don't. People simply suffer. He has done nothing to deserve the disasters and illnesses that befall him. His wife proposes a different line of action. Her suggestion is simple and pungent: "Curse God, and die" (2:9). But Job does not do that either. He maintains his fidelity and maintains that he has done nothing wrong. And God upholds him on both counts.

G. He is right. God is indeed God, and Job has indeed done as he should. But why, then, Job's suffering? He gets his answer. But it is an answer of a very odd kind.

H. The folktale portion of Job, which sets the stage for the posing of these questions, is in prose. The heart of the book of Job, though, is in poetry, and poetry that, even in translation, is of scalding, mind-withering power. And nowhere more so than in God's answer to Job, "out of the whirlwind" (38:1). "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2) is God's overwhelming, opening question, and he asks nothing but questions throughout. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth," "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (38:4,7). Who "shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb" and said "Thus far shall you come, and no farther?" (38:8,11). "Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, that you may take it to its territory and that you discern the paths to its home?" (38:19–20). And perhaps most searing, with a grand sort of sardonic and almost playful irony, "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down his tongue with a cord?" (41:1). "Will he make supplications to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant forever? Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on a leash for your maidens?" (41:3–5). "He counts iron as straw and bronze as rotten wood" (41:27). "He makes the deep boil like a pot," and behind "him he leaves a shining wake" (41:31, 32). "Upon earth there is not his like, a creature without fear" (41:33). "No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up" (41:10).

   And then the conclusion: if Leviathan is so terrible, so overwhelming, "Who then is he that can stand before me? Who has given to me that I should repay him?" (41:10–11).

   And Job answers, "I have uttered what I did not understand" (42:3). "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent" (42:5–6).

I. God's answer to Job is, again, no answer. It is rather something different, something more in the way of a hands-on, experiential demonstration of Job's, and our, final incapacity to understand any answer that could be given. We simply are not up to the task, not wired for such an overload. We are no more prepared to comprehend an answer than, to make use of a memorable example, cats are prepared to study calculus. It's just not in our nature. But that does not mean, so the book of Job suggests, that we have nothing whatsoever to go on. As Job puts it himself, after his encounter with the "whirlwind," "now my eye sees thee." And what that suggests, I would venture, is that though we cannot understand God—cannot speak the divine name, to make the same point in another way—we can nonetheless "see" him or feel his presence. Or to put it another way still, though the Temple is destroyed, God remains.

   We cannot put God in a box, even if the box is the Ark of the Covenant, or our most cherished moral ideals. Not that those ideals are irrelevant, far from it. But they are not God, and they are not even the sum total of our own sense of God's nature and presence.

   This is a point that seemed to me at best a sort of bad-faith slippery argument when I was younger. Job freely concedes that he cannot justify God in rational terms. Indeed, in his own case, what Job has to

assume are God's actions seem contrary to what he believes to be God's nature. That should end the discussion. But it doesn't. Not for Job, and not, at least for many, in real life either. Because our sense of God's presence, if we feel such a thing, is not the result of logical calculation. That does not mean it is illogical, which is what as a student I assumed, and assumed that those who praised Job were trying to gloss over. It just means that our sense of God's presence, if we feel it, is just that—a sense, a kind of given, not the result of reflection, but a basis for reflection, something that is just there to us.

Our view of the tree in the yard is not the result of logical calculation either. It is just a view. Nor, for that matter, is our faith in logical calculation the result of logical calculation. Nor our sense of being loved. Nor being sick or healthy. Nor being in a body. Nor living in time. They are just there, and they are just what they are. We can think about them, but we cannot prove them. So too in a way, and so too surprisingly, our sense of God's presence, should we feel it. Even if we obey and don't prosper, the covenant somehow seems still to hold. Or so in any case the ancient Hebrews seem to have decided.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the answer given to Job? How should we respond when bad things seem to happen for no reason? Where else do we see other stories/figures that resemble Job?
2. It has been argued that one of the great legacies of Hebrew thought is the depth of its response to the questions posed by human suffering. What are those responses? How do they apply to our treatment of others? And how do they apply to our own personal responses to suffering?
3. Contemporary critics have argued that the Hebrew Bible, as we have it, reveals a gradual development in the religious ideas of the Hebrews. What evidence could be advanced to support this argument?

Suggested Reading

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Lecture 4:
Homer and *The Iliad*

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Thomas Bulfinch's *Bulfinch's Greek and Roman Mythology: The Age of Fable*, Homer's *The Iliad* (trans. Robert Fagles), and Malcolm M. Willcock's *Companion to* The Iliad.

Introduction

To move from the Hebrew Bible to Homer, from ancient Israel to ancient Greece, is to move to something close to an altogether different conceptual world. What the Greeks most value is different from what the Hebrews value. The way they think is different. And their historical experience and historical expectations are different. The result for us is a kind of tension. We want to be, indeed we are, both Hebrew and Greek simultaneously. And in the fullest sense can't be, not even after two thousand years or so of practice. But the effort has been and remains fruitful—more fruitful than if we had been the legatees of either Greeks or Hebrews only. For their legacies serve, and long have served, as a kind of counterweight to each other.

I. Historical Background

In considering the Greeks, as in considering the Hebrews, it is probably most helpful to begin with a brief overview of their historical background.

A. In comparison with either ancient Egypt or the ancient Near East, the Greeks were relative latecomers to the table, and they knew it (knowing was something they were good at). The most venerable precursor to Greek civilization is the so-called Minoan culture of Crete (named by archaeologists after the mythical Cretan king Minos), which makes its appearance about 2200 BCE and comes to a more or less cataclysmic end about a thousand years later. By about 1200, whether because of volcanic eruptions at nearby Santorini or Thera, or because of the depredations of the notorious "sea-people," or both, Minoan culture fell into a precipitous decline from which, in its original guise at least, it never recovered.

B. So too, though a bit later, the Greek mainland counterpart of Minoan culture, the so-called "Mycenaean" culture, named after the ruins at Mycenae, the Homeric city of Agamemnon. The Mycenaeans, we are told, flourished from about 1450 to 1000, at which point they too fell victim to the unrest and uncertainties of the age, not without a fight, evidently. They fortified their cities and seem to have done the best they could, to little avail. Greece fell into a "dark age," even literacy was lost, only to emerge in a new guise only about two hundred years later. When working on Phoenician models, the Greeks formulated the first alphabet in the full modern sense of the term by introducing letters for vowels in addition to letters for consonants. It is more or less immediately after this period, about 750, when according to the best scholarly

guess the Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written down, if not composed.

II. The Problem of Authorship

A. Who exactly was Homer, and what exactly did he do in composing the works that have for so long been attributed to him? What we have are clearly not themselves oral performances, though Homer is considered an "oral" poet. They are, in fact, written down, and have existed in written form for going on three thousand years. But almost equally clearly, they are composed of oral formulae and themes. Despite that, however, they are vastly longer than any readily conceivable oral performance could be.

B. One answer to the questions this posed—an answer proposed, and not too surprisingly, by scholars of the same stripe as those who sought to unravel the strands composing the Torah—is simply that there was no Homer. Instead, the poems were stitched together from a series of smaller oral fragments and compositions.

C. I find this answer implausible. For one thing, to the best of my knowledge, the voice of antiquity is unanimous on the point. There was a Homer. And for another, the poems demonstrate a deep-level thematic unity that is nothing like the parallel stories and reconsiderations, the ancient survivals and changes in tone that make the Torah a plausible candidate for the sort of composition that like-minded scholars would attribute to Homer. That is just not how the poems work.

D. My own best guess as to what happened is this: Homer was very nearly the last—and the greatest—of the oral poets, and as writing came to prominence, he saw possibilities that purely oral poetry did not allow for. The preservative power of writing allowed for composition on a scale that oral performance, in and of itself, did not. And he took advantage of those possibilities. My guess is that he was not literate or easily literate. But he was in contact with people who were. I like to imagine children or grandchildren who were. And with their cooperation he orally composed poems on a scale that had never before been attempted, poems that, performance by performance, his literate helpers dutifully transcribed. And that is how I imagine the Homeric poems were composed.

III. Plot of *The Iliad*

A. Let us address *The Iliad* first. It is generally considered the older of the two Homeric poems, and though the plot and background of the story are probably familiar, it may not be amiss to review them again. The actions depicted in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* take place within the context of the Trojan War. Whether or not any such war actually took place is a somewhat vexed question. The Greeks in antiquity thought it had. Even the skeptical Thucydides thought the Homeric account was a grossly exaggerated account of something that had actually happened. Modern opinion, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was more skeptical still, and many assumed that the Trojan War was more or less mythical. More recent opinion inclines to some-

thing closer to Thucydides' views.

B. In the latter part of the Mycenaean era, about 1200 or so, about the time of the "sea peoples" and relatively shortly before the Mycenaean collapse, there seems to have been some sort of siege or conflict at Troy. That event, or several such events, seems to have been the kernel of truth around which the Homeric stories crystallized.

C. The traditional mythological account of the origins of the war is of course more elaborate and more detailed. The mythological tale begins with a wedding attended by the gods, a wedding from which a minor goddess has been deliberately excluded. The goddess is "Eris," or "discord," animosity and strife in personified form, and she has her revenge by bringing to the wedding a golden apple to be awarded "to the fairest." The three most prominent Homeric goddesses immediately seek to advance their claims, and turn to Zeus, the ruler and father of the gods for a judgment. But Zeus is wisely having none of it. He turns the judgment over to Alexandros, or Paris, a son of King Priam of Troy. The result was a scene that utterly delighted generations of Renaissance painters, as Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each sought to convince Paris of their merits, not only through the expedient of displaying them (hence the Renaissance painters' delight), but also through bribery. Hera, as queen of the gods, offered kingship and power. Athena, as goddess of war and wisdom and skill in crafts, offered not only wisdom, but "*techne*," the hands-on ability to do all things surpassingly well. But Aphrodite, the goddess of love and lust, the goddess of "*lovst,*" if you will, offered total erotic delight and satisfaction in the person of Helen, then of Sparta, soon to be Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris chose Aphrodite (who in the usual sense of the term, probably was the fairest anyway).

D. This posed a problem, however, for Helen was already married to Menelaus, king of Sparta, and brother of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, the latter, in Homer's account, the mightiest king in the Greek-speaking world. And matters were more complicated still, for Helen's mortal father (her real father was Zeus), well aware of her incomparable desirability, had made all her suitors swear that they would come to the defense of whoever finally emerged as her husband in the event she was ever abducted, trying thereby, with a fine irony, to prevent her beauty from causing a war.

E. With Aphrodite's help, Paris comes to Sparta as an honored guest, and seduces and carries Helen away. The results are predictable. In due course, in fulfillment of their vows, virtually every king and overlord in Greece follows in a fleet of a thousand ships to wrest her away from Paris and the Trojans and take her home. This proves to be no easy matter, and for nine years the Greek host besieges Troy and plunders the surrounding countryside without making a dent in Troy's defenses.

F. That is when Homer begins his story, assuming, of course, that his audience has all this prior history in mind. The Greeks, it seems, have been busy raiding, and have in the course of their endeavors captured a good many beautiful women, whom Agamemnon, as leader of the host,

divvies up as concubines among the most prominent Greek overlords and warriors, reserving for himself first choice, as it happens, a woman named Chryseis (in English something like "Goldie") and allotting to the man who is beyond dispute his greatest warrior—indeed, far and away, the greatest and most terrifying warrior alive—the second choice, a woman named Briseis of whom the warrior Achilles grows very fond.

G. A problem arises, however. Chryseis turns out to be the daughter of a priest of Apollo, who comes to the Greek camp seeking to arrange his daughter's return. Agamemnon scornfully refuses. This is an offense not only against the rules of hospitality, but since Chryseis's father is a priest, an offense against the god whom he serves. Apollo, the "striker from afar," takes his vengeance by inflicting a plague on the Greek camp, and no one has the nerve to confront Agamemnon so that he will make things right except Achilles. The ensuing conflict sets up one of Homer's recurring themes—the difference between, and often the antagonism between, those who have gained respect and authority because of their position and those who have gained respect and authority because of their deeds. Agamemnon is in the wrong, but he rightly suspects that Achilles confronts him not only because he is in the wrong, but in substantial part, because Achilles resents his position. Agamemnon agrees to give up Chryseis, but he exacts from Achilles a corresponding payment for what he takes to be Achilles' arrogance and disrespect. He appropriates Achilles' "prize" Briseis. And that is where the poem begins, with Achilles' rage in response. "*Menin aeide thea"* are the first words in the poem: "Goddess (or Muse), sing rage." And the first word is *menin* or "rage." Achilles withdraws himself from the Greek coalition, and returns to his tent on the beach, where he prays to his mother, a sea nymph (for he too, like Helen, is half-divine), to use whatever influence she can to persuade Zeus to make the Greeks do badly in battle, to give victory to the Trojans, so that Agamemnon may learn just what sort of man and warrior he has offended.

H. All this often strikes contemporary readers as immensely petulant and selfish, and neither "bright Achilles" nor Agamemnon earns much credit in the encounter. For Homer, though, and for the Greeks, the issues at stake are important, and indeed, in a certain sense they remain important to us. For Greek culture, certainly Homeric culture, was based upon shame rather than upon guilt as a social foundation and sanction for right conduct. Thus, what people thought of you was important—very important.

I. Greek culture, once again, was overwhelmingly competitive. The Greeks sought wealth and power and renown at least as—probably more—unabashedly and fiercely than we. The fundamental ethic at work in Homer is not an ethics of righteousness, though there are codes and cultural expectations that one must not challenge. Nor is it an ethic of compassion. Cities are conquered, warriors killed, women enslaved, and children enslaved or killed at pleasure, and that is that.

J. Everyone in Homer winds up at last as a gibbering shade in the house of Hades, hero and nonentity alike. Homer could not be clearer on the point. For a demigod like Achilles as for the merest foot-soldier, the end is for all practical purposes indistinguishable from nonentity. The Homeric gods, of course, are immortal—that is their defining characteristic—but the dead are nothing and nowhere.

K. What then, on such a view, makes life even worth living? The answer, on the most basic level, is simple. It is better than being dead. The "shameful belly" imposes its own sort of inertia. On the next level, we live, or at least the Homeric heroes live, for *arete* and the *kleos* and for the time, the fame, and glory, that it brings. And here is where the Greeks offer an ethical counterweight to the Hebrews, and where, for good and for ill, we are all of us, in part at least, Greeks still.

L. It follows that if we read *The Iliad* without respecting Achilles and Helen, despite their manifest moral failures, both by our own and by Homer's standards, then in a deep sense we are missing the point. What is most important about Achilles and Helen is quite simply who they are. When he is on, and he is generally on, Achilles is a firestorm in battle. No mortal power can stand against him, and even immortal powers are challenged. That is why he is important.

M. So too in her very different way is Helen. In one of the most powerful scenes in *The Iliad*, she mounts the walls of Troy, where the men too old to fight are watching the battle—and the slow unfolding of the destruction of Troy—as it takes place below. They have every reason to hate Helen. And yet she is Helen. Common sense is not the measure of everything. It is Paris, perhaps, who says it best, as he is reprimanded by his admirable older brother, Hector, the man upon whom the continued survival of Troy finally depends. Paris says, in the translation of Robert Fagles, "don't fling in my face the lovely gifts / of golden Aphrodite. Not to be tossed aside, / the gifts of the gods, those glories . . . / whatever the gods give of their own free will— / how could we ever choose them for ourselves?" (3, p. 130). That is what, in a way, *arete* is, a gift of the gods and a reflection of the gods, every bit as much as a human achievement.

N. The conclusion of *The Iliad* admittedly complicates the picture. Achilles eventually takes pity on the Greeks, and to save his fellows, he allows his best friend Patroclus to take on the Trojans in Achilles' own armor, symbolically taking on, in the process, the tangible expression of Achilles' identity. But Hector slays Patroclus and strips him of that honor, taking Achilles' reputation to himself, and in revenge, Achilles, now wearing armor fashioned for him by the gods, slays Hector. His *kleos* restored—for which, by killing Hector, he has traded his life—his rage abates, and when Hector's father Priam comes to request Hector's body, Achilles pities him and accedes to his request. Does that mean that the ethic of *arete* is thereby invalidated in favor of an ethic of pity? I don't think so. I think instead, Homer complicates the picture. *Arete* still holds. But *arete*, as Achilles learns, is more multifaceted than he supposed.

O. Many critics have written of the “bright despair” of Homer. His outlook is from one perspective almost unrelievedly pessimistic. But it is a profound and far-reaching singular perspective. A life snuffed out is not a life cancelled; it is not even, or need not be, a life thoroughly vitiated and blighted. As Tennyson put it in his own answer to the Homeric vision, “Though much is taken, much abides; and though / We are not now that strength which in old days / Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are” (“Ulysses,” 65–67).

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. To what extent is our own ethical vision like the vision expressed in *The Iliad*?
2. To what extent do we value the same things as people do in the Homeric world?

Suggested Reading

Bulfinch, Thomas. *Bulfinch's Greek and Roman Mythology: The Age of Fable*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000.

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Other Books of Interest

Apollodorus. *The Library of Greek Mythology*. Trans. Robin Hard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hanson, Victor David, and John Heath. *Who Killed Homer?: The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Kitto, Humphrey D. *Greeks*. New York: Viking Penguin, reissue 1972.

Morkot, Robert. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Greece*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1996.

Lecture 5:
Homer:
The Odyssey and the Birth of Tragedy

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Homer's *The Odyssey* (trans. Richard Lattimore) and M.I. Finley's *The World of Odysseus.*

Introduction

Many would claim that perhaps *The Odyssey* is, with the exception of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the finest literary work ever composed. Immensely shrewd, immensely subtle, and constructed with the light-handed, balanced intricacy of the work of the deftest of goldsmiths, it slyly answers and profoundly reconceives the vision of *arete* expressed in *The Iliad*. The language is Homeric, the formulae are Homeric, and the characters too are Homeric—but Homeric with an all-embracing difference in tone and key.

I. Origins

A. According to universal tradition, *The Odyssey* is a later work than *The Iliad*. In a sense, it presupposes the *Iliad*. And one can readily conceive of *The Iliad* as the work of the poet's vigorous early middle age and of *The Odyssey* as the fruit of his hale and reflective later years. In any case, it differs markedly from *The Iliad* not only in tone and viewpoint, but in plot and in the issues that it addresses as well.

B. Here we encounter not rage and war; instead the work celebrates "nostos," or "homecoming," the reintegration of home and society that war disrupts and destroys. In this sense *The Odyssey* celebrates a reconceptualization and widening of the Homeric ideal. *Arete*, in *The Iliad*, still bears the marks of its conceptual origins as preeminence in the crafts of Ares, prowess and excellence in battle. It is in precisely that sense that bright Achilles is the unrivaled best of the Greeks or Achaeans. *The Odyssey* too celebrates martial prowess. Odysseus finally dispatches the suitors with a vigor and resolute thoroughness—vastly outnumbered as he is—that even Achilles would be pressed to match. But he has to make use of other skills, other modes of excellence to do so. *The Odyssey*, in short, celebrates interior excellence—mental excellence and moral excellence. The achievement of that sort of excellence, as *The Odyssey* demonstrates and repeatedly reminds us, is not defined by age, class, or gender.

II. Odysseus

A. Already in *The Iliad* we see the germ of *nomos* or *arete* that expands in the later poem to such luxuriance and breadth. The Trojan Antenor, talking with Helen, describes the impact of Odysseus in council. He is not, in fact, all that prepossessing on the basis of looks. "You'd think him," says Antenor, "a sullen fellow or just plain fool. / But when he let loose that great voice from his chest / and the words came piling on like

a driving winter blizzard / then no man alive could rival Odysseus! Odysseus . . . / We no longer gazed in wonder at his looks" (3, p. 136).

B. In *The Odyssey,* Odysseus is repeatedly characterized as "*polytropos*," as a man "of many turns." On one level, this characterization is rather cryptic—it is not a phrase that we often use to characterize people, but it is appropriate in several ways. In one sense it refers to Odysseus as a man to whom many different things, and many different kinds of things, happen. More profoundly, though, it signals Odysseus's multifacetedness and the multifacetedness of his excellence. He is a kind of idealized self-portrait of what the Greeks themselves wished to be, what in fact at their best they were.

C. But *The Odyssey* not only extends the range of *arete* as we find it celebrated in *The Iliad* as something achievable by their best warrior-kings. Instead, as demonstrated in *The Odyssey, arete* can be achieved, it seems, by anyone in any social position. The notion of universal competence—and of democracy, which in large part stems from it—correlates very well with the wide-ranging sort of excellence that we see at work in *The Odyssey*.

D. Wholly admirable, for instance, is Penelope, the woman for whom Odysseus gave up immortality, and so too, Eurykleia, the old nurse who with Penelope keeps the suitors at bay for years. So too, if perhaps not quite so persuasively, Odysseus's son Telemachus. And so, in what is to me one of the most touching passages in *The Odyssey*, Odysseus's old hunting dog, Argos, who, neglected and abandoned to die on a dung-heap, too weak even to rise, recognizes Odysseus even when Odysseus is in disguise, and with his last breath does his best to greet his much-loved master, home at last after twenty years.

E. The callous and disrespectful treatment of Argos, in fact, is a small exemplification of what is wrong with the horde of suitors who have besieged Penelope on the assumption that Odysseus is dead, and in hopes of not only being Penelope's future bed-mate, but of controlling the kingdom of Ithaca as her consort. Unlike Odysseus, unlike Penelope and Eurycleia, unlike even Argos, the suitors do not show *arete*, though some of them have their virtues. Their fundamental failure is their violation of *nomos* or "custom," the way things are supposed to be and the way that people are supposed to behave. The world of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* is a world without enacted laws. But that does not mean that it is a world without rules or expectations. You are supposed to be respectful of the gods, you are supposed to be hospitable to strangers and wayfarers. The suitors are not. They have for years now taken advantage of Odysseus to live at his expense in his absence, as uninvited guests. And when Telemachus grows to an age when he is able to realize what is going on, is potentially able to take over as king, the suitors' response is attempted murder. The suitors are precise candidates for *arete* as traditionally conceived. They do not achieve it. Odysseus accordingly cleans house with a vengeance when finally he returns and reveals himself. Instead of in the suitors, we find *arete* in Ithaca among people within whom it would not traditionally have been expected, in

Penelope, in Eumaios, even in old Argos, who is in the usual sense of the term not even a person at all.

F. One final point remains to be made. In later antiquity, *The Odyssey* was often read in allegorical terms, as a discussion of how one goes about achieving excellence, and once achieved, how one uses what one has gained to build a viable society. *The Odyssey*, in fact, divides neatly into halves, the first half concerning Odysseus's travels and the travels of Telemachus to find out what has happened to him, the second half concerning events after his return to Ithaca. Interestingly, the parts of the tale that are best remembered involve Odysseus's marvelous encounters with the Cyclops, with the Sirens, with the Lotos-Eaters, and with Circe. All this in fact occupies only four books out of twenty-four, and he narrates these adventures himself. We have only his word for his marvelous travels, and Odysseus, to put the case mildly, is not a man renowned for candor. No matter though. Over the course of those adventures, Odysseus demonstrates that he is a man of many turns indeed, able to overcome the desire for ease and rest, able to keep his head when confronted by desires that would turn most men into animals, able, through foresight, both to hear and to resist the song of the Sirens, and above all, perhaps, a man who can survive and prosper, when necessary, by simple, resourceful, long-suffering persistence. All of these virtues go to make up the sort of many-faceted, complete human being that came to exemplify the Greek ideal, and Odysseus has occasion to draw upon nearly all of them once he leaves the world of marvels and returns to confront the difficulties that beset his homeland of Ithaca.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

In what sense can Odysseus be considered an idealized self-portrait of the Greeks themselves?

Suggested Reading

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Richard Lattimore. New York: Viking Penguin, 1997.

Finley, M.I. *The World of Odysseus*. New York: New York Review Books, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Adkins, Lesley, and Roy A. Adkins. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Brann, Eva. *Homeric Moments: Clues to Delight in Reading* The Odyssey *and* The Iliad. Annapolis: Dry, Paul Books, 2002.

Martin, Thomas R. *Ancient Greece*. Princeton: Yale University Press, 1996.

Plutarch. *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*. Trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert. New York: Penguin USA, 1960.

Lecture 6:
The Birth of Tragedy:
Aeschylus and the Greek Drama

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* (trans. Robert Fagles).

Introduction

Epic and tragedy have for many centuries been considered the most profound and far-reaching literary genres. We have in our last lectures looked at *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and the themes they embody. In this lecture, we turn to Greek drama and to the birth of tragedy.

I. The Origins of Tragedy in Choric Dithyramb and the Cult of Dionysus

A. One of the greatest achievements of Greek culture, and one of the greatest bequests of Greek culture to posterity is the development of drama, and in particular, tragedy.

B. The origins of tragedy lie in the cult of Dionysus, or Bacchus, the half-human, half-divine god in the first instance of wine, and more broadly of intoxication and irrationality, of ecstasy in all guises. The cult of Dionysus was celebrated in a variety of ways, most memorably, perhaps, by *maenads*, groups of women, for the moment freed from the stringent confinement under which they characteristically lived in Greek culture, who took to the hills for ecstatic, no-holds-barred all-female rites, which sometimes included, so we are told, the frenzied tearing of sacrificial victims limb from limb. More subdued celebrations of Dionysus included what was termed the "choric dithyramb," choric hymns and dances performed in honor of Dionysus by celebrants wearing the skin of a "*tragos*," or "he-goat." Tragedy is thus, at least etymologically, and to some extent historically as well, a "goat-song," or a song sung by people wearing goatskins.

II. Quick Overview of Greek Theater

A. In any event, it appears to have been from the choric dithyramb that tragedy developed. Traditionally, the initial step was taken in 554 by Thespis (hence "thespian") who introduced a costumed actor, impersonating Dionysus, or whomever, in addition to the chorus, thereby opening the way to dialogue and to drama as we know it. The innovation was a success, and by 499 the public performance of tragedies was formalized at Athens as part of the Great Dionysia festival held every spring.

B. Before moving closer to take a look at some of the landmarks of Greek drama, though, we will have to pause for a moment to take account of the historical context in which Greek tragedy arose and which in so many respects it reflects. (For a bit of background, read the preceding article on Greek life.) The immediate historical context for Greek

tragedy was a triumph shared by Athenians and Spartans alike. In our next lecture we will have occasion to speak at greater length of the Persian wars than is appropriate here, but it was the Greek's unexpected victory over the Persians—the same Persians who in the person of Cyrus ended the Babylonian exile of the Hebrews—that encouraged the Greek cultural explosion of the fifth century. It lies beyond the purview of these lectures to speak at length about Greek sculpture and Greek architecture, but their greatest days lay in the fifth century as well. The 400s were an era of outstanding achievement not only in drama, but in virtually all arts that the Greeks, and in particular, the Athenians attempted.

III. Aeschylus

A. The first, and arguably greatest, of the surviving Greek dramatists is Aeschylus, who lived from about 525 to 456. It is worth noting that a great deal of Greek drama has not survived, a tenth or so, if that. Aeschylus, for instance, evidently wrote ninety or more plays, of which only six (or by some accounts, seven) survive. He was a veteran of the first great Greek victory in the Persian wars at Marathon, where he took his honorable place in the line of hoplites at the age of thirty-five and may have also fought at the decisive sea battle of Salamis ten years later. Aeschylus's greatest achievement, however, is the only surviving full trilogy from the Greek drama the *Oresteia*, or "Orestes trilogy," which won the title in 458, and represents the last of Aeschylus's plays, written after Aeschylus had worked for more than forty years as a dramatist, and completed when he was in his late sixties and only a year or two before his death. As we have it, the *Oresteia* consists of three plays that function as a narrative and thematic unit, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* or *Choephroi*, and *The Eumenides*. The companion satyr play, *The Proteus*, has most regrettably been lost.

B. The Plays of Aeschylus: Plot

1. Aeschylus builds on both Homer and the wider mythological tradition. *Agamemnon* begins in Mycenae, in Argos, where Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra awaits notification that the Trojan War is at its end, and that Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek host, is on his way home. She has prepared a memorable homecoming for him. For before sailing for Troy, Agamemnon was forced to send for their daughter Iphigenia in order to sacrifice her to secure favorable winds for the outbound Greek fleet, landlocked north of Argos in Thrace. Clytemnestra has never forgiven him, and has meanwhile taken up with Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus, who has his own reasons for wishing Agamemnon ill. In due course, Agamemnon returns exultant from what he thinks of as a triumph of justice, the destruction of Troy and the return of Helen to Menelaus and to Sparta. Clytemnestra, however, is looking for a different sort of triumph of justice, all the more so, perhaps, as Agamemnon has returned with his concubine, the Trojan princess Cassandra, at his side. She invites Agamemnon into the palace for a ceremonial homecoming bath and there destroys him, "a masterpiece of justice"

in its own right, according to the unrepentant Clytemnestra—and kills Cassandra with him.

2. *The Libation Bearers* begins some years later. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra had two children besides Iphigenia, both presumably very young when Agamemnon left for the Trojan War. One was a daughter, Electra, and the other Orestes, a son. When *The Libation Bearers* begins, Orestes has returned from exile to pay his respects to the grave of his father. He leaves on the grave a lock of his hair. Shortly thereafter Electra appears with a group of serving women, bearing libations, ceremonial offerings of wine or oil, in order to pay her own respects. She sees and recognizes Orestes' lock of hair and his footprints. Thus brother and sister meet and commiserate together. The upshot is that Orestes in his turn slays both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in revenge for the death of his father. But this does not put a stop to the proceedings. Quite the contrary. Orestes has slain his mother, and despite his justification, such deeds offend the deepest powers of earth and the defenders of blood and of family. Orestes is beset by the Furies: "Women, who look like Gorgons, shrouded in black, their heads wreathed, swarming serpents," the "hounds of mother's hate." Orestes is not alone in his terror. The costumes of the actors portraying the Furies were reportedly so terrifying in the original production of the *Oresteia* that one hears of audience members frightened literally to death.
3. Be that as it may, when *The Eumenides* begins, Orestes has attempted to flee their vengeance by seeking sanctuary at Delphi, the oracle of Apollo. There Orestes kneels at the navelstone in Greek eyes, the center of the world, the Furies asleep around him, awaiting their chance, and there Orestes gains the protection of Apollo, who sends him off to Athens as the Furies sleep. The Furies are not long deceived, however, and awakened by the ghost of Clytemnestra, they set off in pursuit and overtake Orestes again, now at Athens, and under the protection of Athena. The scene then moves to the Areopagus, site of the Athenian law-court, where Athena brings the matter to trial—mythologically, the first trial—to be adjudicated by ten Athenian citizens. When all is said and done, the votes for conviction and acquittal are tied, and Athena judges in favor of Orestes, setting the precedent, on one hand, that tied cases result in acquittal, and meanwhile placating the Furies by assuring them that even under the rule of enacted law, they will have their honored place in the city as guarantors of law and good order. To symbolize their new role as the "Eumenides," the "Kindly Ones," they are invested in crimson robes, and Athena, the Furies (now-Eumenides), the judges, the actors, and the audience form a procession celebrating the new order of law and of justice. The play ends in a celebratory parade.

C. What does Aeschylus make of the *Oresteia* thematically? Well, on one level he is seeking to resolve or to rectify a deep-seated tension in Greek culture, a tension between what are called "chthonic" and

"ouranic" deities, between earth-goddesses and sky-gods, and by implication, a tension between genders and between modes of social organization. It is clear that Aeschylus is acutely aware of the cultural tensions and dichotomies these stories reflect.

1. For all their terribleness, the Furies are earth goddesses, and they are old, and speak in so many words of their resentment of "young," usurping sky gods like Apollo. And the task of the Furies is above all to maintain the integrity of the family, of blood relations, most importantly the sanctity of the mother. For a woman's husband or partner is not her blood relation. Greek culture of antiquity emphasized the father's role over the mother's. Apollo explicitly makes such claims in the *Eumenides*, that the mother is merely the "receptacle" for the father's informing seed. The Furies know better, and may indeed hearken back to a time when the father's role in reproduction was unclear. The mother's role has never been unclear. And that is, in effect, the Furies' point. There is no stronger human bond. Thus their claim that absolutely nothing can justify killing one's mother. Orestes is theirs by right, and they mean to have him.
2. Likewise Clytemnestra. Her husband, no blood relation, has killed her daughter, and to make matters worse, has killed her daughter to benefit a group of other men, none of them being blood relations of hers, who gathered to assert patriarchal honor by taking back Clytemnestra's sister Helen, who has clearly demonstrated her own womanly preferences by running off with the Trojan Paris. Clytemnestra has, needless to say, no sympathy whatsoever for Agamemnon's notions of justice.
3. From Agamemnon's side, though, things look different. Horrible though it was, he had to sacrifice Iphigenia for the greater good, for the good of his army, who with limited supplies could only stay landlocked for so long without starving, and to fulfill the vow that he and the other Greek leaders had made to turn against anyone who abducted the eminently desirable Helen. He is also asserting the value of marriage as a contract, and more generally of contracts simply.
4. Orestes, in his turn, seeks to vindicate Agamemnon's point of view, and of course, Apollo supports him. By bringing the matter explicitly to trial, Aeschylus acknowledges the merits of both points of view, and by submitting them to Athena, he seeks to reconcile them. Athena relies on *peitho* or "persuasion," on rationality and the adjudication of differences. In the process of so doing, she initiates the rule of law, and that is what the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides seeks to celebrate. And of course, in the *Oresteia,* the rule of law comes to be at Athens, as a reconciliation of these tensions, in the human world and in the world beyond, and that in its turn is why the trilogy ends in a parade of rejoicing and triumph.
5. Aeschylus seeks, among other things, to make sense at all levels of the world in which we find ourselves. That is, in large part, why the gods are so prominent in the story. It will not do to term Aeschylus the very first theologian. The Hebrew writers had long anticipated

him in that regard. But he is in a sense the first *Greek* theologian insofar as in the *Oresteia* and elsewhere he seeks to make sense of the world of the gods as well as the human world.

D. We do not know what went on in the *Proteus*, but we do know that the chorus was a chorus of seals. The tale of Proteus comes to us from *The Odyssey*. Proteus is a sea god who is able to change shape at will and whose custom it is to rest every day for a time on the beach with the seals. Menelaus, blown off course to Egypt on his way home from Troy, the recaptured and presumably repentant Helen in tow, finds himself becalmed and must consult Proteus to find which god he has offended to merit such contrary winds. His question answered, Menelaus then asks Proteus about the return of the other Greeks, and from him learns of Agamemnon's death. My suspicion is that Aeschylus took advantage of this story to take another, more ironic, look at the demise of Agamemnon, and perhaps the general questions of marital harmony and gender relations as well. It is, after all, presumably Menelaus who would be doing the questioning, and the marital history of Menelaus raises interesting questions of its own.

E. In sum, then, to use a tag phrase, the *Oresteia* celebrates what we might term "the nike of dike," the victory of justice. It celebrates, in the first instance, the triumph of law over feud and revenge. It celebrates, in the second, the triumph of law and of *peitho* or persuasion.

F. And it celebrates, in the third, the triumph of law as manifested in the adjudication and reconciliation of the different visions of justice embodied by Clytemnestra and the Furies on the one hand and by Agamemnon and Apollo on the other, all crystallized in the person of Athena and the judgment on the Areopagus, the mythical precursor of all subsequent trials.

IV. Sophocles

Space and time, sad to say, prohibit our treating the other Greek dramatists at comparable length, but we must at least pay our respects. Aeschylus's younger contemporary Sophocles was the most successful dramatist of all in the annual competitions, which he won about twenty times over the course of his long life (ca. 496–406). He wrote, all told, something in the neighborhood of 130 plays, of which a bare seven survive. But they are strong and rich enough to ensure him a reputation that at least equals that of Aeschylus. It is telling that Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, discusses Sophocles' most famous and celebrated play, *Oedipus Rex*, or *Oedipus the King* (430), as the *de facto* prototypical tragedy. And few need to be reminded of what has been made of it in more recent times, not least by Sigmund Freud, who saw in the story of the man who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother a skeleton key to our submerged emotional life. *Antigone* (441) looms very nearly as large on the cultural landscape, admired as much by political scientists as by literary critics. *Antigone* effectively assumes and reverses the reconciliation sought by Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*, for Antigone dies out of loyalty to family in opposition to law and the polis, dies indeed explicitly questioning the justice of law and the polis.

V. Euripides

The third and youngest of the great tragedians was Euripides (ca. 484–406), a man of pronouncedly different character and interests than either Aeschylus or Sophocles, and a man whose plays, initially at least, seem to have gained a somewhat less sympathetic hearing. He won, in any case, four or five times to Sophocles' twenty. But more of his plays have survived than those of either Aeschylus or Sophocles, more indeed have survived than those of Aeschylus or Sophocles together, nineteen out of a total of eighty or so. The reason for this is purportedly the popularity of his plays in later times as school texts for study. His focus is, so to speak, secular and skeptical, and he focuses with a special intensity on erotic problems, on sexual pathologies. His treatment of women characters, Medea, Phaedra, and others, is forceful, intense, and often notably sympathetic. And his last play, the *Bacchae*, produced in 405, a year after Euripides' death and at the very end of Athens' days of glory, expresses more clearly than any other the opposed impulses that Friedrich Nietzsche identified in his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), as giving rise to Greek drama itself. *The Bacchae* depicts the relations of Bacchus, or Dionysus, and the young king of Thebes, Pentheus. Pentheus disapproves of Dionysian revels, and when he encounters Dionysus himself, he does not recognize him. Indeed, Pentheus imprisons Dionysus. Dionysus's response is to make Pentheus mad, and in his madness Pentheus is consumed by a desire to peek in on the all-female *maenad* rites of which he so much disapproves. He does so, and is spied and caught and torn to pieces by the revelers, his own mother among them. The gods, if there are gods, are not just, and trying to keep too tight a lid on things leads not to order but disaster.

VI. Comedy, Old and New

A. It remains only to discuss Greek comedy, however briefly. Comedy came later to the festivals than tragedy, but it had its honored place, and could hardly be more different in tone than the somber works we have previously discussed. The greatest practitioner of what is called the "Old Comedy" was Aristophanes (ca. 450–385), a generation younger than any of the tragedians. His comedy is fantastic, outrageous, obscene, pointedly topical, and often blissfully unfair. In ancient Athens there were no libel laws, and Aristophanes takes full advantage of his unfettered freedom of speech to attack and burlesque whomever and whatever he wishes, most famously, or notoriously, Socrates. His exuberant freedom and energy are all the more remarkable dating as they do from the time when Athens was facing defeat and destruction in the Peloponnesian War against Sparta and her allies, which ended in 404 with a near-total Athenian defeat.

B. Athens indeed never rose again to anything much like her former glory, and the most influential writer of the "New Comedy" was Menander (342–292), who lacked Aristophanes's sublime and manic carnival energy, but whose plots and characters, scheming slaves, would-be young lovers, overbearing fathers and the like, set the pattern for the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence—whose plots, in their turn, are not too

different from some of the plots of the far later French dramatist Molière, and are indeed, not wholly dissimilar to what one might find in a TV sit-com (as opposed to Aristophanes, whose tone is more like that of an X-rated, libel-free, exuberant skit on *Saturday Night Live*). So far as subsequent influence goes, the New Comedy was far more important than the Old, in large part, so I imagine, because only a society where speech was as free, or close to as free, as it was in Athens could begin to tolerate such work. And from the days of Athens to the present, there haven't been many such societies.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are some of the differences between the “Old Comedy” of Aristophanes and the “New Comedy” of Menander?
2. Why were tragedies written and performed in Athens, but not in Sparta?
3. Why does the dramatic tradition survive today?

Suggested Reading

Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Classics, 1984.

Plautus, Titus Maccius. *Plautus and Terence: Five Comedies*. Trans. Deena Berg and Douglass Parker. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays: The Suppliants, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. New York: Warner Books, 1976.

Euripides. *The Baccae and Other Plays: Ion, The Women of Troy, Helen, The Bacchae*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. New York: Penguin Classics, 1973.

———. *Medea and Other Plays*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. New York: Penguin Classics, 1976.

Sophocles. *Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Classics, 1984.

Lecture 7:
Herodotus and Thucydides:
Historians and Hellenism

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Herodotus's *Histories* and Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War.*

Introduction

It is often claimed that the Greeks invented history, but in a way this claim is misleading. King-lists and celebratory records of regal conquests and military triumphs are common enough both in Egypt and in the ancient Middle East, and we have already discussed the biblical records of the Hebrew past. What sets Greek history apart is its self-consciously systematic character as an attempt to reconstruct the past, in the case of the Greek historians, of the recent past, on the basis of firsthand knowledge and interviews with eye-witnesses—on the basis of the most reliable evidence available, whatever that may be—and to some degree its characteristic, and characteristically more or less secular, sense of what forces find expression in historical events and processes. We will look at the two greatest and most celebrated Greek historians.

I. Herodotus

A. The Persian Wars

1. The great subject of Herodotus is the Persian Wars, the decisive Grecian defeat of two invasions led by the politically unsurpassed and expansive Achaemenid Persian Empire, which we have already encountered in the person of its founder Cyrus, liberator of the Hebrews in Babylon. (China was not unified at the time, and even a unified China, while more populous, would have been less extensive and certainly far less culturally diverse than Achaemenid Persia.) The Empire's first expedition was more or less punitive in its intentions and was relatively small-scale, though still a good deal more substantial than anything even a unified Greece could have defended against. And Greece—as usual—was anything but unified. The second was an altogether more serious matter, as massive as any invasion mounted anywhere up to that time, and bent unambiguously on putting an end once and for all to the problem posed by the Greeks by means of outright conquest and subjugation.
2. The story begins with a revolt in Ionia, that part of the Greek-speaking world, greater Hellas, if you will, that consisted of the Greek islands and what is now the Aegean shore of Turkey. Ionia had for some time been part of the Persian Empire, and it is only fair to say that as ancient empires go, the Persians were relatively benign rulers. Nonetheless, Ionia revolted, and Athens, among others, helped the rebels, even going so far—too far—as to burn the local

Persian capital at Sardis, in what is now inland eastern Turkey. This, understandably enough, irritated the then Persian king Darius, who sent messengers demanding and expecting submission. Persian policy was for the most part to leave local elites at least nominally in power and to enforce as little in the way of cultural change as possible. What Persia wanted was submission and taxes. Most Greek states, much intimidated, complied. Athens and Sparta did not. So the story goes, what the Persians asked for was earth and water as tokens of submission. The response of throwing the Persian messengers down a well, where they could get all the earth and water that they wanted, was not taken as a sign of submission. The verbal response later attributed to the Spartan king, Leonidas, when the Persians demanded that he lay down his arms, catches his tone in one of the models of Laconic brevity and bluntness: "*molon labe*," "come and take them." The Persians tried.

3. The first invasion came in 490. In defiance of all expectation, Persian and Greek alike, the Athenians did win the victory, very significantly outnumbered and without Spartan help, assisted in fact only by a small contingent from the nearby polis of Plataea. They thereupon marched as quickly as possible back to Athens, should the Persians attempt to land there.
4. That was, in fact, what the Persians had in mind, but they thought better of the matter and went home. The Spartans, marching quickly and hard once the moon was right, arrived after the battle and made a point of marching off to inspect the battlefield, twenty-odd miles further along. They were duly impressed.
5. But the Persians were not finished, not even close. Darius died before a second expedition could be mounted, but his son Xerxes took up the task. And in 480 the Persians returned in vastly greater force.
6. The Greek coalition, meanwhile, in signature Greek fashion, debated what to do. It was, somewhat reluctantly, agreed that an attempt should be made at least to slow the Persian advance to the north of Athens and of the Corinthian isthmus. The site agreed upon was the narrow seaside pass at Thermopylae, less than one hundred miles northwest of Athens.
7. The Spartans made an important political point by sending an elite force of three hundred-odd *homoioi*, or Spartan "equals," to head up the defense at the pass, led in person by one of the two Spartan kings, Leonidas (the Spartan governmental system was relatively complicated, and Sparta always had two kings). The point the Spartans were making was, of course, that this time they were in all the way and for the duration, that they were not going to retreat—that they were not even tempted to retreat—into the Peloponnese and let the rest of Greece suffer its fate. As Herodotus puts it, "The Spartans sent Leonidas and his men on ahead in the hope that the sight would inspire the rest of the allies," and "discourage them from joining the ranks of those who were already collaborating with the

enemy, as they might if they got the idea that the Spartans were holding back" (7.206). It worked.

8. The defense at Thermopylae is probably the thematic climax of Herodotus's *Histories,* and arguably the most psychologically decisive small battle ever fought. One might argue that for Herodotus, Greece as an ideal was born at Thermopylae, and Greece as an ideal still lives. The Spartans had other forces with them, but not many. There were about four thousand total according to Herodotus, and before the end of the fight, when the situation was revealed as absolutely hopeless, the Spartans sent these allies home. Xerxes, his army behind him, reportedly waited for four days before beginning his attack on the pass, unable to believe that so small a force seriously intended to contest his passage, outnumbered as they were by hundreds, if not thousands, to one.
9. On the fifth day, stung, so Herodotus claims, by the impudence and folly of the force before him, Xerxes ordered an advance, despite Demaratus's warning that he was "up against the noblest city in Greece, and the bravest men" (7.209). The outcome, as Herodotus puts it, "made it plain to everyone," and "above all to the king himself, that although he had plenty of troops, he did not have many men" (7.210). On the following day, Xerxes committed his own elite troops, with no better result. "The Lacedaemonians fought a memorable battle; they made it quite clear that they were experts, and that they were fighting against amateurs" (7.211).
10. Then, however, the tide shifted. A pro-Persian Greek, or perhaps one merely hopeful of reward, offered to show the Persians a mountain trail that would allow them and their allies to surround the Spartans. The Persians jumped at the offer, and Xerxes sent his best troops off on the track. During the night, the Greeks became aware of the maneuver, and it was at this point that Leonidas sent his allies home. Only a very few chose to remain, and before noon it was over. The Spartans and the remaining allies died to the last man. Their epitaph, set up on the spot after the Persian Wars, is one of the most memorable ever composed. Following the rendition of Steven Pressfield, from his admirable fictionalized account of the battle, *Gates of Fire*, it runs as follows: "Tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, / That here, obedient to their laws, we lie."
11. Thermopylae was the Spartans' finest hour, where their virtues showed brightest and least impeded by their limitations and institutionalized moral failures. There is a surviving portrait head from Sparta, purportedly of Leonidas, though no one really knows for sure. Its expression is, to me at least, deeply moving and deeply calm—an even, balanced gaze, lips tightly pressed into a slight and cryptic smile. It seems to evoke what was best in Sparta, and the service that Leonidas and the *homoioi* performed for Greece at Thermopylae, knowingly and willingly sacrificing themselves as an example for the greater good of Greece as a whole.

12. In any case, after Thermopylae, no real resistance lay between the Persians and the Peloponnese, and they made their way unopposed into Attica, the Athenian homeland, and put Athens to the torch. The Athenians, meanwhile, evacuated to the nearby, off-shore island of Salamis, only to bicker further with the allies. At issue, of course, was where next to mount a defense. Many favored the Peloponnese or the Isthmus of Corinth. Athens favored a naval battle in home waters. And by dint of the machinations of the brilliantly wily and unscrupulous Athenian leader Themistocles, Athens prevailed.
13. They had to persuade the rest of the allies and their fleet not to retreat from the anchorage off Salamis, where they had been bottled up by the Persians, closer to the Peloponnese, and to the Greek lands not yet under Persian control. According to Herodotus, Themistocles, at the decisive moment and entirely on his own initiative, forced the allies' hand by sending a secret emissary to Xerxes encouraging him to attack because the allied fleet was about to retreat. Xerxes took the bait.
14. The Persian fleet was larger, but the Persian crews were on the whole less skilled than their Greek, and particularly their Athenian, counterparts. When the day was over, the Greek victory was complete. After some consideration, most of what remained of the Persian fleet withdrew, and Xerxes with it. Without the fleet to supply it, most of the army had to withdraw as well, and Xerxes left only a much-diminished, though still substantial, military force under the Persian commander Mardonius to finish the task that had, from a Persian perspective, so unpropitiously begun.
15. The next year, in 479, Mardonius's force was defeated decisively at Plataea by an allied Greek army led by Sparta, and the Persian Wars were over. The Greeks, beyond hope and expectation, had won and had preserved their independence against the strongest military power on earth. That is Herodotus's great story, and a great story it is.

B. Greek Self-Consciousness: One Last Point about Herodotus

Interested in and sympathetic toward the "barbarian" world though he may have been, Herodotus is also deeply Hellenic, deeply Greek in his orientation. As Herodotus tells it, the Greeks won the Persian Wars because they enjoyed a sort of cultural and moral superiority to their opponents and deserved to win. The Greeks won because they were braver, and they were braver, in large part, because they were free. In this too, we are heirs of the Greeks, and as Americans or Britons, perhaps more so than most. We too believe deeply and strongly in the moral value of our vision of freedom and believe strongly that, in large part, our military and political resilience are a direct expression of that freedom. It is an idea that Herodotus would have found deeply congenial. Indeed, as much as anyone, he invented it.

II. Thucydides the Athenian

A. Life and Character

"Thucydides the Athenian," as he styles himself at the very beginning of *The Peloponnesian War*, was a man of profoundly different character from Herodotus. Where Herodotus is genial, celebratory, inquisitive, and at times almost a chatty raconteur, Thucydides is none of the above. To be sure, he is telling a different sort of story, but the difference goes beyond that. Despite the complexity of his arguments, his grammar, and his thought—and they are all very complex indeed—Thucydides gives the impression of taciturnity, of a tight-lipped, disciplined tendency to say less than he might. Thucydides is writing about ugly truths, but he is tough enough to look them in the face. It is as if the only way to deal with a largely self-inflicted disaster like the ones he chronicles is a relentless and pitiless exposing of precisely what modes of overconfidence, vengefulness, selfishness, greed, self-deception, and folly brought about the catastrophe. *The Peloponnesian Wars* does not make for light or pleasant reading save to the most astringent tastes. That is fine with Thucydides. As he explicitly tells us, "I have written my work, not as an essay to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time" (1.22). Thucydides was a conservative Athenian aristocrat, born about 460, who lived until some time not too long after 400. Early in the wars that he describes, he served as general, or "*strategos,*" for Athens, but he was cashiered after a defeat in which he played a subsidiary role and thereafter was evidently not directly involved in the conflict. Instead he appears to have devoted himself to his writings, which come to a stop with the events of 411, well before the conclusion of the wars in 404.

B. The Peloponnesian War

1. Before addressing the work itself, though, we will need to spend at least a little time outlining the course of the war that Thucydides chronicles, the war that on his own account of the matter was the greatest and most significant fought up to his time. The *Histories* of Herodotus from one perspective at least read like an epic or even like an extended song of triumph, and he writes in a time when Greek culture was at its glorious apex. Thucydides, by contrast, writes in something close to a time of tragedy, when the Greeks, and the Athenians in particular, through folly, overconfidence, and internal strife, bring that great age to an end, and to an end forever, as I believe Thucydides foresaw. In the twenty-odd centuries since, Athens has never again been what she was before the Peloponnesian Wars. The loss was real and permanent, and in the eyes of Thucydides, at least, theoretically preventable.
2. The war broke out in 431. The real reason for the conflict, as Thucydides explains it, was Spartan fear of a growing Athenian power. Funded in large part by what began to look more and more like exploitative taxation of her putative allies, Athenian naval power grew, and Sparta, understandably, began to wonder just what the limits of Athenian ambition might be.

3. As events would prove, as a first approximation at least, there weren't any limits, which is exactly what the Spartans feared—hence the outbreak of hostilities. Spartan practice in such circumstances was to send off an expeditionary force each summer, which would dutifully ravage the homeland of whatever polis had gained Spartan ire. So they did in Attica, sending the Athenians fleeing. This would not have had much effect, though the Athenians were dependent on imported grain, not local grain—except for one thing. In 430, while most of Attica was holed up in Athens itself, a plague broke out. The effect was catastrophic and profoundly demoralizing, not least to Thucydides himself, who was one of the relatively few to come down with the disease and survive. Some of his most memorable and most harrowing pages describe the disease itself and the ensuing social breakdown. Thucydides' vision of human nature seems to have been permanently darkened by what he saw in the way of inhumanity, cowardice, and despair. And the plague took Pericles, who was an able and inspiring leader who had a war plan—basically, wait it out; as long as the navy is okay, we're okay—which Thucydides implies would have worked if the Athenians had been persuaded to stick to it. But of course they weren't, certainly not with Pericles gone. And on Thucydides' account of the matter, it would not have been easy even for Pericles to persuade the Athenians to sit tight. It just wasn't in their character. Athens was way too ambitious, energetic, and acquisitive a city to rest for very long.
4. Instead, the Athenians dreamed of grander things. And the grandest of all was the Sicilian expedition, which led directly to the destruction of Athens as a great power. It was a daring move. The plan was to send an expeditionary force to conquer the city of Syracuse in Sicily, thereby vastly expanding Athenian wealth and power, and so tipping the financial and military balance ever more sharply in Athens's favor. Once having conquered Sicily, so Athenians hoped, the horizons would be unlimited. And had they succeeded, indeed they might have. Athens and not Rome might have dominated the centuries to follow. But it was not to be. The leader of the Athenian force was to be Alcibiades, who defected to Sparta rather than face a trial. Alcibiades convinced the Spartans that no one was better equipped than he to tell the Spartans how to thwart Athenian plans, since he had made the Athenian plans. And the Spartans were persuaded.
5. Even so, the Spartan course of action was a bit surprising. Instead of sending an expeditionary force of their own to Sicily, they sent a general to take over operations and teach the Sicilians how to fight. It was enough. It took a while, but in the end the Athenians were totally and catastrophically defeated with losses of something very close to one hundred percent of the very substantial forces involved. The last Athenian prisoners were left to die in the stone quarries at Syracuse. Athens never really recovered, though they kept on fighting for another ten years, only to lose decisively and for good when the Spartan commander Lysander in 405 caught the Athenian fleet

beached at Aegospotamae, not far from Troy, and burned the ships. (Incredibly enough, the deposed Alcibiades was nearby, having twice switched sides, and warned the Athenians beforehand of their danger. They ignored him.) That was the end. The Spartans set up a sympathetic oligarchy in Athens, and the war was over.

C. The Birth of Political Philosophy and "*Realpolitik*"

The story itself, however, arresting and significant as it is, is not what scholars and critics, political philosophers in particular, tend to value most in *The Peloponnesian War*. Instead, they tend to admire the sophistication and acumen of Thucydides' political thought. With *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides gives birth to political philosophy as self-conscious (and in his own case, a rueful) discipline. Where Thucydides does the work that has gained him such admiration is not so much in the narrative itself as in the speeches he attributes to the various leaders and demagogues who discuss what action is to be taken. These he has, as we suggested above, embellished to reveal "what was demanded" by the occasion, that is to say, he has made them up to reveal what he believes to be the issues actually at stake and the presuppositions and motives actually guiding the choices made. The result, still shocking in its baldness and directness, is the first abstract discussion of what has come to be called "power politics," what the Germans call *realpolitik*, that is to say, politics conducted not on the basis of even a putative allegiance to moral principle, but politics conducted instead in straightforward, ruthless, and unapologetic pursuit of material advantage and power. "The weak suffer what they must" (5.89). Thucydides, once again, never directly contests such assertions, but the whole story he tells suggests the results of following such counsels, and the result for Athens is disaster. It is, in his unstated but all-pervasive view, a profoundly sad story.

D. The Funeral Oration of Pericles

Before leaving Thucydides, though, we need to turn at least briefly to the celebrated funeral oration of Pericles, delivered just before the plague and his death—indeed, the narrative of the plague directly follows and to some degree undercuts the significance of the funeral oration. Be that as it may, the oration is stirring—Abraham Lincoln seems to have drawn upon it to some perceptible extent in composing the Gettysburg Address—and however much undercut by what follows, the funeral oration reveals some sense of what Thucydides feels was lost, squandered away, in the fall of Athens.

In the oration, Pericles says of Athens that "as a city we are the school of Hellas," if not indeed, the school of the world (2.41). We are, he says, "rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves," not least because "our administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy (*demos* means "people" or "common people," *kratos* means "power"). If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all." If we look "to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit." And the "freedom which we enjoy in our gov-

ernment extends also to our ordinary life," we "do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes." Furthermore, "we provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business," and we are an open society, we "throw open our city to the world" (2.37, 38, 39). These are values important to Thucydides, and needless to say, they are values every bit as important to us still.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. To what does Thucydides attribute the final defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War?
2. Does Thucydides support *realpolitik*?

Suggested Reading

Herodotus. *The Histories*. Trans. Aubrey De Selincourt. New York: Penguin USA, 1996.

Pressfield, Steven. *Tides of War: A Novel of Alcibiades and the Peloponnesian War*. New York: Bantam Books, 2001.

Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Rex Warner. New York: Penguin USA, 1976.

Other Books of Interest

Kagan, Donald. *The Peloponnesian War*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2003.

Pressfield, Steven. *Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.

Lecture 8:
Socrates and Plato

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Plato's *The Last Days of Socrates* and *The Republic.*

Introduction

And now we come to perhaps the greatest of all Greek contributions to posterity. It is not so much philosophy or even science in themselves, incalculable though the influence of both has been, but rather the fundamental assumption manifest in both that the most effective way of making sense of the world is systematic rational thought. Before we turn to the great masters, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who are rivaled only by the Hebrew Bible in shaping the fundamental way in which we think, we will once again need to briefly consult the historical context in which these ideas developed.

I. Historical Background

Philosophy begins in a context of threat, in a time of questioning, and that perhaps is no accident.

The Peloponnesian War was for Athens an unmitigated disaster from which, in a political sense, she never entirely recovered, though after Aegospotamae in 405, the Spartans made no attempt to make Athens a Spartan colony. Sparta was not interested in conquest as such—the Spartans had enough trouble keeping the lid on the helots at home and showed no desire to gain even more unruly and resentful subjects. But Sparta was very interested in cultivating regimes that would not cause Sparta any trouble, and they accordingly supported in Athens a new non-democratic regime, composed of the so-called "Thirty Tyrants" who were sympathetic to Sparta. As might have been predicted, this didn't work. The Athenians were far too committed to their own institutions to readily accept even a light Spartan yoke, and democracy was restored in 403. Athenian power, however, remained more or less broken, and for at least a generation, Sparta, with Persian acquiescence, was able to dominate Greece. That is the context in which Plato wrote.

II. The Turn to Philosophy

A. New Way of Knowing

1. Greek rationalism—philosophy and the beginnings of what we would term "science" alike—represented as it grew in persuasiveness and power, something new in the world. No such sustained and systematic effort to make sense of the world in this way had ever been recorded before. And it was a significant departure even to the Greeks themselves. From the very beginning, Greek rationalization showed a methodologically skeptical cast of mind, and this could be, from some perspectives at least, both disorienting and threatening.

2. The new rationalism was disorienting in another sense as well. Unlike the Hebrews, the Greeks didn't really have any sacred texts, certainly no texts that remotely rivaled the Hebrew Bible in religious influence. But they did have traditions about the gods, about right behavior, about *nomos*, about the way things were supposed to be, and these were embodied as fully as anywhere else, probably *more* fully than anywhere else, in Homer. These oral traditions invited people to listen and remember, not to think.
3. The new rationalism was threatening because it sought to take the rules of conduct out of the intuitive, narrative context in Homer, and the day-to-day context of ordinary life, in which you simply knew what you were supposed to do, and to think them through and make them coherent, and abstract. To turn them, so to speak, from custom to law. Just what is the nature of *time*, or honor, of *dike*, or justice? As we have seen, Aeschylus addressed these questions in dramatic terms in the *Oresteia*. Socrates and Plato, however, would address them in much more systematic and abstract terms than even Aeschylus had attempted. Despite Herodotus and Thucydides, as we have noted, the Greek vision of the world was not in the last analysis historical, and the new rationalism was in this sense in far closer harmony with the general tenor of Greek thought than the researches of Herodotus and Thucydides. The Greek rationalists were interested primarily in what had always been and always would be, in the eternal nature of things, in the sort of things that tended to happen, rather than in the specifics of what had happened at this particular place and time.
4. But they departed from Greek tradition in another far-reaching sense. Tragedy, both as a literary genre and as a worldview, presupposes that at some deep level the human condition is incurable. And this worldview finds expression as clearly in Homer as in the tragedians themselves. The rationalists, or the philosophers in any case, worked from a different and more optimistic point of view. They felt we could figure things out, and we could, if we sought wisdom, find a durable happiness that is in substantial measure beyond the reach of disappointment and misfortune.

B. The "Pre-Socratics"

In a profound sense the story of philosophy, as we think of it, begins with Socrates and Plato. Although it seems to have been they who decisively shifted the focus of systematic rational investigation to human pursuits and human conduct, they certainly had predecessors. Their predecessors, though, for the most part focused their attention somewhat differently, directing their speculations and observations above all toward the natural world.

1. The tale begins, once again, in Ionia. The great Oxford Platonist of the last century, F.M. Cornford, once wrote, having been invited to deliver a lecture on the origins of science, that he was tempted to

begin with the statement: “Greek philosophy began when Thales of Miletus successfully predicted an eclipse of the sun in 585 B.C.,” and that is as good a place as any to start.

2. Thales, in fact, did more than predict eclipses. He speculated as to what, if anything, lay behind the shifting appearance of the world we see before us. It is the same question, fundamentally, as is posed by twenty-first-century physicists in pursuing string theory, unified field theory, elementary particles, and quarks and their components. Thales of course had a different answer. He proposed water.
3. Pythagoras, working in Greek Sicily a generation later, in the late 500s, proposed a more sweeping answer still, one of the most inspired suggestions ever made. His proposal was numbers, working from his discovery that musical harmonies depend on mathematical ratios. Further he suggested working from the manifest effects of music of human consciousness, that there was a fundamental concord between the structure of the world without and the internal dispositions leading to harmonious right conduct.
4. Other figures proposed other answers. Heraclitus (ca. 540–475) focused his attention not so much on whatever may give rise to or lie beyond the constant change we see before us, but upon the process of change itself. His most famous saying is “everything flows,” and hence, both literally and metaphorically, you can’t step into the same river twice. The processes of change, in short, go all the way down, though Heraclitus does postulate fire as the ultimate constituent of things.
5. Empedocles (ca. 484–424), in his term, proposes a scheme in deep harmony with unsystematized Greek intuitions as to the way things work. Fundamental to Empedocles was the ying and yang-like contention between the forces of “*eros*” and “*eris*,” of love and strife—of yes and no, if you will. He also hypothesized the four “elements” that, chemistry aside, are with us still: earth, water, air, and fire.
6. With Parmenides and Anaxagoras, we come closer to conceptions that seem to have directly influenced Socrates and Plato. Parmenides, who was evidently born about 515 and lived well into the mid-400s, drew a sharp distinction between the changing world of appearances in which we live, a world full of motion and development, of birth and death, a world filled with ongoing processes of “becoming” (and unbecoming), and the unchanging world of “being,” which he believed to lie beyond and to give rise to the world before us that our senses apprehend. Thus, for Parmenides, the ultimate constituent of things, what lies beyond, is being itself.
7. Anaxagoras (ca. 500–428) evidently took Parmenides one better by maintaining that what gave rise to or controls all before us was not just being, or not only being, but rather in some sense mind, or *nous*. Otherwise, how are we to account for the orderedness of the world, despite the ongoing processes of change that always surround us?

III. The Figure of Socrates

All of these figures, though, pale in importance for us in comparison to Socrates, who has become one of the cultural touchstones by which we measure ourselves and our achievements, a thoroughly real-life figure who has also become almost a mystic figure, as well the wise man of all wise men, though that is a designation he took great pains to qualify, if not precisely to deny.

A. Socrates' was a long life and could have been longer. He was born in 470 or 469 and, notoriously, was executed for impiety and for corrupting youth (not least among them Alcibiades) by the restored Athenian democracy in 399. He wrote nothing. But his disciples and hangers-on did, Plato, of course, above all, but Xenophon too (who is most famous for his account of mercenary expedition gone wrong in service of the Persians). And his critics wrote about him as well, most notably the comic playwright Aristophanes, who pilloried him mercilessly in *The Clouds*, in which Socrates attempts to ascend heavenward and literally gets stuck—on stage—in a basket. He was the occasion of constant comment.

B. Socrates is probably most famous as a martyr to philosophy. Plato's account of Socrates' trial, last days, and execution, rejecting schemes for his escape and when the time comes, calmly drinking the fatal cup of proffered hemlock, is deservedly a staple of undergraduate education in the liberal arts.

C. Pinning down what Socrates actually thought, though, is difficult. Clearly he thought of himself as a "lover of wisdom," which is, of course, what the word "philosopher" means. But what does it mean to be a lover of wisdom? That perhaps is not so clear. What exactly does wisdom consist of? That is just the sort of question that Socrates asked, consistently refusing to give direct answers to such questions himself.

D. Socrates was, then, from one vantage point, a supreme ironist, a master of irony, someone who, that is to say, consistently, systematically says what he doesn't mean in order to convey his meaning.

E. Alcibiades' vision, I would argue, is precisely what Socrates seeks to evoke by means of the famous Socratic method of question and answer, the famous Socratic dialectic. The people with whom Socrates is speaking claim to know something. He asks questions. It turns out that they do not know. They try again. He asks more questions. They still don't know. And on and on the process goes. It must have been—it clearly was—immensely irritating to some of those with whom Socrates spoke. But to others, and just as clearly, it was life-transforming.

F. Socrates knew exactly what he was doing. The key lies, paradoxically, in the title he was willing to claim for himself, that of a "lover of wisdom." We ordinarily think of wisdom as something like deep practical knowledge on stilts. It is not, in fact, a very useful word as we employ it, because by convention it refers to something that, following Socrates, no one is willing to claim, and that we are hesitant even to attribute to

others. It is, in that sense, a sort of knowledge "over the horizon." But what he meant by wisdom, I think, was not so much knowledge as we usually think of it or reliable rules of conduct, but the insight, the experience, that gives rise to knowledge and the rules of conduct. Socrates was, in short and in his way, something closer to a religious teacher than what we ordinarily think of as a philosopher.

Reason and the dialectical processes that fostered reason were for Socrates not so much ends in themselves as means toward an end. And the end was direct experience, direct apprehension of something that could not and cannot, to my knowledge, be directly encapsulated by reason, by words, by logic, or by anything else. It can only be experienced.

G. The Greeks, revealingly, had several words for knowledge, "*dianoia"* or thinking things through, "*epistime"* or knowledge simply, and "*noesis"* or just getting it—immediate, intuitive insight. Part of Socrates' point, as I take it, is that in the end, it's all *noesis*; other procedures and modes of knowing are just ways to trigger *noesis* by holding the problem at hand in our attention or breaking it up step by step. And at the highest level, he implies, *noesis* explodes into something else—by *noesis* of *noesis* we can apprehend what I think was the real God of Socrates. Socrates looked, says Alcibiades, like Silenus. But there were gods inside. Through experience and vision, then, Socrates knows what neither he nor anyone else can know through explanation, but through rational processes only. We cannot reason without having some notion of what counts as truth. But we can only know what counts as truth by consulting our vision of what counts as truth. Hence arises the paradox. Reason does not in the last analysis rely on reason. It relies on a sense of what counts as truth so we will know when we have reasoned correctly. So too with the good, and so indeed with the beautiful. That is why for Socrates the good, the true, and the beautiful are in a powerful sense ways of designating the same thing. They are the horizons of thought, the things we must know in some sense before we can know anything else. But we know them in a different way than we know everything else. They are givens. They are there, in a way, before we start.

IV. Plato

A. Or so, beyond question, Plato thought, and the Socrates who has become a mythic figure is almost entirely the Socrates whom Plato presents for us. Others wrote about Socrates, as we discussed above, but they didn't see in him what Plato saw, and without Plato's account of Socrates, he would be for us little more than a footnote, a curious name. In fact—through his evocation of Socrates, who is, if anyone is, almost always Plato's mouthpiece in his dialogues—Plato is the founder of philosophy as we know it, and remains, almost twenty-four centuries later, the most influential philosopher who has ever lived. Plato in large measure set the terms in which philosophy has been conducted ever since and not only raised many of the central questions that philosophy has sought to answer, but provided some very influential and far-reaching answers to them. Plato was, in effect, though informally, Socrates' student and disciple. (It had to be informally, because

one of the last things Socrates was likely to do was set up a school; that would have been contrary to his whole ironic, "take-them-on-the-flank-and-by-surprise" approach to things.) Plato came, though, from a very different background than Socrates. Not much is known about the early life of Socrates, but he apparently came from what was in effect a middle-class to lower-middle-class family, certainly not part of the Athenian elite, and is said to have been, at least by training and when he found the time, a stone-cutter. Plato, by contrast, was born to an aristocratic family, one of the most influential in Athens, and one that was to some extent suspect to the majority.

B. *The Republic*: Justice and Virtue

The most famous of Plato's dialogues is his *Republic*, composed at the height of Plato's powers, during his early middle age, and it purportedly, and typically, recounts a series of conversations taking place a generation before.

1. Plato too, like his master Socrates, seldom speaks directly. No character named "Plato" appears in the *Republic*, though two of his elder brothers appear (Plato himself would have been of late high-school or college age at the time of the discussions), and we have no direct or indisputable way of knowing which of the opinions discussed Plato intends us to take as his own. It is generally accepted that Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece, and that is probably so, but Socrates, as we have seen, is anything but a clear and unambiguous speaker as Plato portrays him. Instead, Socrates characteristically confines himself to asking questions, leading questions, admittedly, but questions still, and on occasion proposes what he characterizes as "myths," that is to say, stories suggest but do not directly proclaim what Socrates, and presumably Plato, take as truth.
2. The dialogue form itself reproduces an ongoing interplay of ideas. Of course, the dialogue form itself resists what literary critics are fond of calling "closure," that is, a set of statements that more or less unmistakably seek to tell us which of the various ways we can interpret what we have read is the correct way. Plato instead gives us discussions, which by their very nature explore multiple points of view. And rather than reporting as a participant or an eyewitness, Plato generally locates his discussions in the past. All of these gestures are designed not so much to provide answers, but certainly to raise questions, to engage us as readers in the dialogue and to make us think things through along with the people involved in the discussion.
3. In the *Republic*, Plato divides an imaginary polis into three classes. The overwhelming majority are ordinary folks engaged in ordinary tasks. The next class, the so-called "guardians," is the class from which the "philosopher kings," or rulers of the republic, are drawn. When people talk about the *Republic*, it is generally the guardians and the philosopher kings they have in mind. Leadership belongs to the third group, the philosophers, or philosopher kings.
4. Plato's primary concern, despite appearances to the contrary, is not so much with how a polis should be governed, but with how a soul

should be governed and how we should behave. And his city, as Socrates himself tells us when he begins to describe it, is in effect the soul writ large. As his city has three classes, so the soul has three parts. The first, which corresponds to the common people of the city, is appetite and desire, our wish for food, our sexual desires, our wish for comfort and what can bring us comfort. This is in the broadest sense *eros*. The second, corresponding to the guardians, is what the Greeks called *thumos*. Translators of the *Republic* often render the word as "spiritedness," but that is a word which we ordinarily use for horses, not people, and it means, in this context, something more like energy, enthusiasm, and will to resist, the capacity to stand up to, even to relish, the challenge of adversity and pressure. Both *eros* and *thumos*, though, can not get out of hand, and that is why leadership belongs to the third group, the philosophers or the philosopher kings, because they alone, or they certainly more than others, have appropriated the wisdom that allows them to judge what desires need to be satisfied, and to what extent, and what threats need to be resisted, and to what extent. The philosopher kings, of course, correspond in individuals to reason and the capacity for *noesis*, our ability to see the true and the good and the beautiful and to act accordingly.

5. This analysis of how to behave, by the way, became more or less the default moral model not only for pagans in antiquity, but for Christians during the Middle Ages and Renaissance and long beyond. It is plainly at work in the writings of Jane Austen, whose novels date from less than two centuries ago, and truth be told, it has not been entirely superceded yet. It is one of Plato's most durable and valuable contributions.
6. Plato is, at last, most celebrated for the doctrine of Platonic "forms," to which we have already referred, and in proposing the doctrine, Plato advanced an enduring insight and in the process founded, on a deep and enduring basis, the philosophical discipline of epistemology, the systematic study of knowledge, how it is that we know what we know. All thinkers up to Plato's time, to the best of my knowledge, had simply taken our capacity for knowledge as more or less a given, the tools of the trade, so to speak, not as something to be thought about and considered in its own right. Plato did think about it, did step out of the ordinary run of thoughts to think about thinking itself. And in that gesture, I would argue, philosophy as we think of it begins.
7. For when he began to think about thinking, Plato discovered something strange. We ordinarily think in terms of categories, when we are thinking in words at least, and often, too, when we are not, when we are just unreflectively going with the flow, engaged in fundamentally nonverbal activities like playing a musical instrument, or gardening, or painting, or just performing ordinary tasks. And what Plato noticed was that these categories do not, in fact, correspond in a rigorous, one-to-one way with the things we use them to categorize. Such categories are, in effect, the forms by which, consciously or not, we make sense of the world. Indeed, for Plato, the world of forms is prior

to and somehow gives rise to the world of things. Forms come first. That is why he is so fond of mathematics. He thinks that thinking about triangles will accustom us to the notion that real things exist which are not physical, and thus help us when the time comes to recognize the forms for what they are.

8. Earlier on I compared Socrates to a Zen master, making use of whatever tactics lay at hand to edge people into the experience or the vision of the true and the good that led them to wisdom. For Plato, thinking about the forms was such a means, because for him there was a form of all forms, a sort of universal form. In the *Republic*, Socrates characterizes the process. Starting with physical things, you move to the forms, things that are visible not to the eyes, but to the intelligence, to the mind. This is, according to Socrates, "the soul's ascent to the intelligible," and it doesn't stop with the contemplation of numbers and triangles and forms. The form of all forms, the form "of the good is finally and with difficulty seen in the knowable realm, and when seen it must be reckoned the cause of everything upright and beautiful in all, begetting in the visible world light," and being in its own right "the lord giver of truth and intelligence in the intelligible world, that which a man must see to act rationally for himself or his community" (517 b–c). Which is why, for Plato and Socrates alike, only philosophers, only those who have made the "ascent to the intelligible," are fit to rule.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What does Socrates mean in claiming that he is not wise, but rather a "lover of wisdom" or philosopher?
2. Why does Plato value mathematics so highly?
3. How did "thinking about thinking" begin philosophy?
4. What are the Platonic "forms," and why does Plato believe in them?
5. Why do you have to have a sense of what is true or what is good before you can start to think about what you think is true or good, or how you can tell what is true or good?

Suggested Reading

Plato. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Trans. Hugh Tredennick. New York: Penguin USA, 1993.

———. *The Republic*. Trans. Desmond Lee. New York: Penguin USA, 1976.

Other Books of Interest

Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Xenophon. *Conversations of Socrates*. Trans. Hugh Tredennick. New York: Penguin USA, 1990.

Lecture 9:
Plato and Aristotle

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Aristotle's *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (ed. Richard McKeon).

I. *The Symposium:* Eros and Philosophy

A. If the most famous and, very likely, the most influential of Plato's dialogues is the *Republic*, the most elegant and in many ways the most evocative and suggestive is the *Symposium*. It too is a work of Plato's hale middle age, and it hearkens back to a time when Plato was in his early adolescence, the fateful year 416, on the very eve of the Sicilian expedition that would prove to be Athens's undoing. The symposium, or drinking party, itself was purportedly held in celebration of the first victory of a young playwright named Agathon, none of whose plays in fact survive. The revelers decide, because they are a little worn from the previous night's celebrations, that they will not do any really serious drinking and decide instead to take turns speaking about love—and proceed to do so. Most of the speeches need not concern us, though they are most deftly arranged, and in a way their sequence embodies what will turn out to be Socrates' final point.

B. The speech attributed to Aristophanes, though, the same Aristophanes who a few years before had satirized Socrates (no hard feelings, evidently), is worthy of at least brief mention. Aristophanes tells a deliberately silly and incongruous story with a serious and evocative point. The story is that humans were originally double and round, two persons per sphere, male and male, female and female, or female and male as the case might be, and that the gods divided them, and that ever after humans have achingly searched for their lost half, seeking to heal what Aristophanes poignantly calls "the wound of human nature" (191D).

C. Socrates, though, as the final speech, takes an entirely different tack. He begins, predictably enough, by claiming to be no particular expert on love, and to remedy his deficiencies offers to reconstruct as best he can what a wise woman named Diotima once told him about the subject. There may conceivably have been a Diotima, but most scholars think not. The name itself means "honor of god," and most scholars take her to be Socrates' mouthpiece, Socrates once again being hesitant to speak out directly in his own voice. What Diotima describes is an "ascent to the intelligible" very much like that evoked in the *Republic*, but an ascent starting in a different place, not with early training in music and mathematics leading to philosophy, but instead with love, and in particular the love of beautiful boys that seems to have been a more or less accepted aristocratic custom among Greek men (though some, it must be said, have argued otherwise) not only in Athens, but also in Thebes at least, and Sparta. She describes ascending a stairway of beauty and finding wisdom and immortality.

D. But the *Symposium* doesn't end there. When Socrates finishes his speech, loud voices and commotion outside disturb the revelers, and who should appear but glittering Alcibiades himself, probably the most prominent man in Athens, Socrates' own reputed lover (or from a Greek perspective, beloved), scheduled very soon to lead the vast expedition to Sicily, and, at the moment, royally drunk. The power of his entrance of course depends in large part on our knowledge of what is to follow, the defaced Herms, Alcibiades' defection to escape arrest, and the final disaster in the Sicilian quarries, and later still, complete Athenian defeat at the hands of Sparta, and ultimately the death of Socrates, all this evoked by Alcibiades' presence. And it is Alcibiades who describes Socrates as a Silenus with gods inside. Alicibiades has climbed the stairway, or if he has not, he had every opportunity. But if he did, he climbed back down. As Alcibiades puts the matter himself, Socrates "makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings." So "I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for like the Sirens he could make me stay by his side till I die" (216A–216B). This is puzzling. What does Plato mean? I think that he is implying that, yes, we can climb to wisdom. But we also can choose to climb down. There is no surefire cure for our ills, even if we talk with Socrates. In that sense, at least, maybe the tragedians were right after all.

II. Aristotle, the Universal Pantomath

Plato was, as we suggested above, the most influential philosopher who ever lived. And so indeed he was. It may then be surprising to hear that Plato's pupil Aristotle was in many respects greater than he.

A. An expert in many fields is called a "polymath," somebody who knows many things. Aristotle was more than that—to a unique degree he was an expert in all fields, a "pantomath," to coin a term, somebody who knew everything. Here is a sampler. He was, beyond question, the greatest logician of all time. For centuries his logical works formed a mainstay of university education, and were in many respects not significantly improved or expanded upon until the mid-nineteenth century. That is a mighty long run. He was, after Darwin, probably the greatest observational biologist who ever lived. He wrote the first surviving book of physics, and continued with the first systematic book of metaphysics, the philosophical study of being as such. His *Ethics* to this day remains as influential and illuminating as any philosophical work on the subject ever written. He is, in the *Politics*, the founder of systematic political philosophy. He wrote the most important and influential book on rhetoric ever composed. Finally, Aristotle wrote in the *Poetics* the first and by a wide margin the most influential work of literary criticism ever composed—influential, it might be added, even though only half of it survives.

B. These achievements are all the more remarkable in view of the fact that what has survived of Aristotle's work is not his finished compositions, but his lecture notes. Whether he wrote them by himself or if they were taken by his students is not always clear.

C. Aristotle is the "Greekest of the Greeks." To the Middle Ages, he was simply "the philosopher." They didn't have it far wrong.

He was born in the cultural equivalent of rural Saskatchewan, at a small place called Stageira or Stagira. His father was court physician to Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander, and Aristotle himself for a time came to serve as Alexander's tutor. As a young man, however, he came to Athens to study as Plato's star pupil—and later rival—at the Academy, and went on to found his own competing school, the Lyceum. The works he bequeathed to us seem for the most part to derive from the varied course of study offered there.

Aristotle's vision is all-embracing, and wide enough to cover virtually any field to which he directed his attention. He is, to begin with, what is called a "common-sense realist," and this is a point of view that, I must confess, appeals to me deeply. Aristotle's generous belief is that most people are more or less right about most things most of the time. In this he stands in stark contrast to his mentor, Plato, who believed that most people at a fundamental level were getting things wrong. Aristotle thought differently. His conviction was that any belief that persuaded serious thinkers—that persuaded, for that matter, ordinary people by and large—must have something to recommend it, must be at least to some degree right.

D. Aristotle starts from the premise that the world is composed of the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, with a fifth element, "ether," added to account for the heavens. For though the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets move, they do not otherwise change or die, at least within most human lifetimes. Therefore, so the argument goes, they must be made of different substances than the things we see on earth. On earth, though, things do change, and Aristotle explains why. All things are composed, in various and changing combinations, of the elements. That is what they are made of, their material basis, or Aristotle would have it, their "material cause." But what we see is not just lumps of stuff. And even when we do see lumps of stuff, they are lumps of stuff that we see. All material things, in other words, even lumpy things, have a form, a "journal cause." And the forms can change. He also identifies an "efficient cause," what immediately makes something happen—what we ordinarily think of as a cause—and a "final cause" or *telos* or goal.

E. Where Aristotle departs from most contemporary thinkers is in assuming that virtually all things and all actions have a built-in *telos,* a *telos* that is part of their very nature. So how then does this vision work itself out in human terms? Well, human beings have a built-in *telos,* too. Our *telos* is to be the most effective human being we can, to live a long, healthy, and happy life, to avoid destructive or short-sighted habits and anything else that would prevent our reaching that goal. And the study of how we achieve those ends is ethics.

F. What about politics? Well, we humans are intrinsically social. We live in groups, and politics is simply the study of how those groups can function most effectively, how they can help us to live the most fulfilling lives that we can.

G. And so it goes all the way through. All things have a potential, and their goal is to achieve that potential as fully as possible, to achieve, as Aristotle would put it, their *entelechy*, the full-fruition toward which their intrinsic nature is designed. And thus the world of Aristotle is "teleological" all through, directed by nature toward this or that goal. So too all motions and all activities. Aristotle's world is one full of change, but change directed by purpose. Even the stars and planets have goals, though here things get a little quirky. For their goal is to replicate as far as they can the unchanging happiness of Aristotle's god, the "first mover" from which all change and motion ultimately derive. Aristotle's god is *noesis noeseos*, "thought thinking thought," or *noesis* noeting *noesis*, happily thinking, that is to say, about its happily unchanging self. And the heavens, which for Aristotle are, or are moved by, conscious beings, seek to be as much like his god as possible, imitating that unchanging happiness in terms of motion by the motion closest to rest—spherical rotation.

H. There is one final point about Aristotle that I gratefully steal from the lectures of my colleague, Professor Joel Richeimer. Aristotle repeatedly claims that different fields of inquiry allow for different degrees of certainty. Some things can be rigorously proved, and some things can't, but the fact that we can't rigorously prove something doesn't mean that we don't know it. Professor Richeimer's example of the sort of thing Aristotle has in mind here is the factory floor, where the engineer knows some things, and the thirty-year sheet-metal worker knows something else. The engineer knows the equations. But the sheet-metal worker knows metals. Some things can only be learned hands-on, and just don't reduce to equations or explanations. For those things, so Aristotle says, you don't need arguments. You need experts. You need a *phronimos*, someone with hands-on knowledge to set you straight. That is true of pretty much all skills. And it is true, so Aristotle would say, of ethics too. It's not finally a matter of rules. It's a matter of making the most of what you know. It's a matter of experience, and common sense. And that frame of mind is what is so refreshing about Aristotle. His is a philosophy you can live with.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

Aristotle's vision of the world focuses on the idea that all things have a built-in potential that they are trying to fulfill. His world, to use the technical term, is "teleological" all the way through. How does this vision apply to ethics? To politics?

Suggested Reading

Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House Adult Trade Publishing Group, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. New York: Penguin USA, 1991.

———. *De Anima: On the Soul*. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. New York: Penguin USA, 1987.

———. *Poetics*. Trans. Malcolm Heath. New York: Penguin USA, 1997.

———. *Politics: Aristotle*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Dover Publications, 2000.

Lecture 10:
Virgil and Rome

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Virgil's *The Aeneid*.

Introduction

And now we turn to Rome, closer to us in both time and character, than either ancient Greece or ancient Israel, and in some sense more directly our cultural forebear than either. In part, of course, this is because Rome conquered Greece and the Near East. They appropriated Greek culture certainly and what we know of as Hebrew culture has come down to us affected by centuries of Roman control and influence. The Roman empire served as a kind of chrysalis, protecting, sometimes in spite of itself, the legacy of cultures far older and in many respects richer than its own.

I. Historical Background

Before we turn to the works of Virgil and Ovid, generally considered, along with the lyric poet Horace, to be the greatest poets that Rome produced, we will need, as usual, to look at the historical background in order to set their works in context.

A. The rise of Rome is in some respects an unlikely story. At the time when Athens was in her prime, Rome did not in fact amount to much, either in political or cultural terms, certainly not compared with Greece. But soon that began to change. By early in the third century BCE, Rome had gained control of most of Italy, and shortly thereafter embarked on the series of wars that would lead her to empire and world power. By the third century, of course, most of the eastern Mediterranean lay under Macedonian control, dominated by dynasties founded by one or another of Alexander's generals. The western Mediterranean, though, was more or less up for grabs. The leading contender was at that point the prosperous North African trading city of Carthage, founded centuries before by the Phoenicians, and very near the modern city of Tunis in Tunisia.

B. The Romans first ran afoul of Carthage in Sicily, where both were competing for influence. This resulted in the first Punic War (the Carthaginians spoke Punic, a semitic language derived from Phoenician, and were often themselves referred to as "Punic"), a conflict that extended from 264 to 241 and finally resulted in a Roman victory. Not, however, an easy victory. The Carthaginians were skilled seafarers, and the Romans, particularly at this point, most emphatically were not. In fact, so the story goes, they did not even know how to build galleys until they got a hold of a Carthaginian model washed up on a beach. Nevertheless, they were persistent, despite the heavy costs of their on-the-job training in naval warfare and seamanship, and in the end they succeeded in checking the Punic forces even at sea.

C. The defining war for the Romans, though, was the war that followed, which as long as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire endured, was remembered as the toughest and most dangerous that Rome ever fought. Thwarted in Sicily, the Carthaginians turned to Spain, where soon enough they came in conflict with the Romans again. This time, though, the Carthaginians had a commander of genius, one of the most capable who ever lived. The name lives still, Hannibal Barca. In 218 Hannibal led his almost entirely mercenary army, taut, supple, and well-trained, in a surprise invasion of Italy, marching from Spain over the Alps. In short order, Hannibal engaged and defeated a Roman army at Trebia. A year later he destroyed another Roman army, ambushing it in the Appenines in the morning fog at Lake Trasimene and driving a substantial proportion of the Roman forces into the lake. Roman casualties at this point were staggering by any standard, comparable in raw numbers to those of the United States in the Vietnam or the Korean War, and in proportion, immensely more severe. And the worst was yet to come.

D. At Cannae, in southern Italy, the Romans lost catastrophically yet again—this time, so it is said, in the bloodiest day of fighting until the British went over the top in the first battle of Somme in World War I. Rome had, in roughly two years, lost three armies to Hannibal, losing in the process something on the order of 100,000 men. Hannibal's hope was to persuade Rome's Italian allies, many of them largely recent conquests, that he came as their liberator. But Rome's relatively benign policies paid off. Hannibal proved unable to spark the rebellion that he hoped for, and after Cannae the Romans wisely changed their tactics, following the advice of one of the great Roman heroes, Fabius Maximus, called as an honorific "Cunctator," which means, oddly enough, "the Delayer." And delay he did. Pitched battle with Hannibal had proved to be a consistently losing proposition. But Hannibal was a long way from home. And without Italian allies, he could not finally subdue Rome. So the Romans confined themselves to "delaying," avoiding pitched battle, but staying in the field and in the meantime making Hannibal's life as worrisome as possible.

E. Meanwhile, a most capable Roman commander arose elsewhere. The war was contested in Spain as well as in Italy, and in Spain a young Roman aristocrat named Scipio, later honored as Scipio Africanus, the greatest hero of the Roman Republic, was proving his worth. In 204, Scipio took the war to the Carthaginian homeland in Africa, and the threat that he posed forced Hannibal to follow. And finally, in 202, sixteen years after the war began, Scipio defeated Hannibal at Zama. That was the end of the Second Punic War and the real beginning of Rome's long role as a dominant power. The whole western Mediterranean was now effectively in Rome's hands, and republican government or no, Rome was now, in territorial extent at least, an empire.

F. The Third Punic War, from 150 to 146, was in comparison an afterthought, and resulted in the complete and utter destruction of Carthage (though the victors, after a suitable interval, ultimately rebuilt a city on the site). Thereafter the Romans turned their attention eastward. The conquest of

Macedonian Greece was a gradual process, pretty much completed at the battle of Pydna in 168. This marks the birth of a new composite culture generally characterized as "Graeco-Roman," that is to say, ruled by the Romans, but in cultural terms a sort of composite, both Greek and Roman, more Greek, of course, in the East.

G. As Roman power and influence grew, though, the traditional government of Rome began to suffer from the strain. The celebrated Roman Republic, which was in truth something more like a (slightly) limited and (very) complicated aristocratic oligarchy, had not evolved to rule a world empire, and as it began to acquire one, the ensuing tensions erupted in repeated waves of civil war. The conquests, of course, continued apace, but that only exacerbated the tensions. Pompey conquered the Near East; Caesar conquered Gaul, Rome gained control of Egypt. And still the turmoil continued.

H. The troubles dated back to the time of Marius and Sulla at the turn of the first century BCE, if not before, and during the 60s and 50s they intensified. Caesar and Pompey at last, somewhat reluctantly, squared off, and at Pharsalus in 48 Caesar triumphed only to fall to assassination four years later in 44. This led to another round of civil war, as Caesar's assassins and his friends and heirs contested his legacy. The characters here are familiar from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. At the battle of Philippi in 42, Mark Antony and Octavian, the great-nephew and heir of Julius Caesar, later to become Caesar Augustus, defeated Cassisus and Brutus, according to Shakespeare "the noblest Roman of them all." (I have, for what it is worth, never accepted Shakespeare's judgment here. I can think of a dozen nobler Romans—Scipio, Fabius, and Caesar himself among them.)

I. In the years to follow, Antony and Octavian fell out. Octavian was headquartered in Rome, Antony in the East, for the most part at Alexandria, where from 41 on he allied himself with and became the lover of Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic—that is to say, Greek-speaking Macedonian—ruler of Egypt. Octavian mounted a propaganda campaign against Eastern, "oriental" degeneracy and influence, and the legacy is with us still in the lurid reputation of Cleopatra. This final contest was decided at a naval battle taking place off the western shore of Greece, at Actium—not far, in fact, from Odysseus's old home island of Ithaca. And that was that. Though no one at the time could know it, the civil wars had come to an end, and Octavian cautiously and capably set himself to refashioning the state, all the while maintaining, and perhaps believing that he was remaining faithful to, if not restoring, the traditions of the Republic. Posterity has thought differently, and has taken the long reign of Augustus, as he came to be called (31 BCE–14 CE), as the beginning of the Roman Empire.

II. Virgil and *The Aeneid*

That is the world in which Virgil wrote.

A. His first major work is the *Eclogues*, upon which he worked from about 45 to 38, that is, during his late 20s and 30s, and during one of the

most violent and uncertain phases of the civil wars. The *Eclogues* take as their model the *Idylls of Theocritus*, a collection of poems in which the speakers are purportedly simple and untutored shepherds, leading an uncomplicated rural life devoted to their loves and their flocks. *Theocritus*, in fact, established a genre, the genre of pastoral poetry, which at least pretends to be about the presumably simple concerns of shepherds. From the very outset, however, pastoral poetry was not exactly what it seemed to be. For Theocritus himself was no shepherd, but rather a sophisticated poet who admired and seemingly yearned for what he imagined was the simplicity and directness of pastoral life. Pastoral poetry then reflects not so much the concerns of countryfolk themselves, but the concerns of cityfolk who see, or think they see, virtue in the simplicity of rural life. In his first major work, Virgil adopted the pastoral idiom and he put it to a new sort of work by using what were already pastoral conventions as a backhanded and indirect way to talk about contemporary political concerns.

B. *The Eclogues* are thus a far more sophisticated and supple set of poems than they appear to be, and one in particular had a great effect on Virgil's later reputation.

C. "Eclogue IV" speaks of the coming birth of a miraculous child, perhaps even one born of a virgin, who will inaugurate an age in which "any lingering traces of our guilt will become void," who "will have the gift of divine life" (13–15), and under whose influence the world will enter a new age of peace and plenty. It took far less imagination than later Christian commentators turned out to have to see in "Eclogue IV" a pagan prophecy of the coming of Christ. That is one reason why, when more than thirteen centuries later in *The Divine Comedy* Dante needs a guide to get him through purgatory and hell, his guide turns out to be Virgil.

D. Virgil's next major work was the *Georgics*, which are in effect a poetic how-to guide about farming (*georgos* in fact means "farmer"). This seems an odd choice of subject for an ambitious poet like Virgil, and the poetic genre in which he was working is one that is no longer with us, but had a far greater prominence in Virgil's own day. The genre is what is called "didactic" poetry, that is, poetry at least purportedly designed to teach, and it had already in Virgil's day a venerable legacy. The *Georgics*, upon which Virgil worked at his usual methodical pace (supposedly about one line per day) from 36 to 29, doubtless seemed a good deal less strange when they first appeared than they do now. They are, in fact, more enjoyable to read than you might expect. Virgil has a gentleness of spirit and a love of nature that are most appealing. And once again, Virgil has, at least in theory, a few political ends in view. Now in better graces with the administration, his concern is supposedly to help those soldiers given land to make the best of their legacy.

E. In any event, it is for his next work that Virgil is remembered, and that is, of course, *The Aeneid*. *The Aeneid* occupies a unique position in Western culture. In a very real sense, it is *the* classic. Homer was almost always more highly praised than Virgil, but for many centuries in western Europe,

almost no one could read Greek. Knowledge of ancient Greek, even among the highly educated, only became common in the nineteenth century, which was the great age of Hellenic studies, and before about the mid-1400s, Greek was, with the rarest exceptions, simply unknown in the West. And there were no translations of Homer. The case with Virgil could not have been more different. Until the 1500s, and in large part even until the 1800s, anyone who was literate at all was literate in Latin. And pretty much everyone who was literate in Latin read *The Aeneid*, by common consensus from Virgil's day to our own the greatest work of Latin literature. Thus, in the West at least, *The Aeneid* has been continually read and admired, generation after generation. (I myself teach it at least once a year.) Virgil's legacy is accordingly immense, and it has been immense since the outset. Dante, for example, and many others more or less knew *The Aeneid* by heart.

F. Virgil was at work on *The Aeneid* from 29 until his death in 19, on the way home, as it happens, from a research expedition to check out the places he had been writing about. He was not quite finished with the work, and, perfectionist that he was, he wanted the unfinished work destroyed. Caesar Augustus himself ordered otherwise. For by this time, Virgil stood very high indeed in Augustus's good graces and had become something equivalent to unofficial poet laureate of Rome. And, as the immensely shrewd Augustus doubtless recognized, Virgil had not by any means lost his interest in contemporary politics. The real hero of *The Aeneid*, almost always offstage though he is, is none other than Augustus himself.

G. In *The Aeneid,* Virgil sets out deliberately to reconceptualize and to "correct" both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in a Roman context. Books I to VI of *The Aeneid* are Virgil's *Odyssey*. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus makes his way home from the Greek victory at Troy, after he and his fellow "Achaean" or Greek warriors have destroyed the city and left it in ruins. In books I to VI of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas, the greatest surviving Trojan warrior and a cousin of the slain Hector, who was effectively the Trojan crown prince as well as Troy's greatest warrior, leads a band of Trojan refugees to a new home in Italy, in Latium—actually, in Rome itself, though Rome at this time is yet to be. Aeneas's route is very nearly as roundabout and difficult as that of Odysseus's, as Aeneas leads his refugee band to Crete, to Carthage in North Africa, and to Sicily before making his final Italian landfall. Virgil's tactics here are careful and deliberate, and there are several points to be made. Virgil is writing deliberately for a Graeco-Roman world, for the whole Roman empire, not just for Italy. The stories that the Greeks valued above all others turn out, in Virgil's hands, to have been Roman stories too.

H. But there are deliberately significant differences between the journey of Odysseus and the journey of Aeneas. Odysseus, admittedly (or so we are told) with some reluctance, embarked on his travels and left Ithaca in order to help bring destruction to Troy. Aeneas embarks on his travels not to destroy a city, but to found one, and a city, so Virgil tells us, destined by divine prophecy to be the greatest that has ever been, a city destined to endure forever and to bring law to the world and finally to bring to

an end the sort of predation and violence that Aeneas escapes while leading his refugee band from the burning ruins of Troy. Odysseus travels to his old home in Ithaca because he wants to go home. Aeneas travels to his new home in Italy because it is his divine mission to found his new city there, and when he is tempted to stop and settle elsewhere, the gods make sure that he keeps going.

I. The second half of *The Aeneid*, books VII to XII, chronicles the war that Aeneas is forced to fight to ensure his Roman legacy. He does not seek war. Neither, for that matter, do most of his opponents. The one seeking war is the goddess Juno, who in this context embodies one of the factors that makes *The Aeneid* a great and subtle work of literature, rather than mere pro-Augustan cheerleading. For to Virgil, all things are difficult and all human achievements are imperfect and partial, even things that are immensely worth doing, even things that are favored by the gods. Even so, all human actions involve loss, even the best ones, and there is a kind of rough inertia or resistance in the very structure of things that works against us, no matter how worthy our aims, and no matter how hard we try. That is what Juno seems to represent in this context. Aeneas hopes to settle peacefully, and many of the Latins have no objections. But it is not to be. And when the time comes and necessity forces him, Aeneas fights hard and effectively, as the Romans characteristically did. He is fighting, though—and Virgil is at pains to make the point unmistakable—not to destroy a city, but to found one, and a city unlike any other in its devotion to law, to good government, and finally to the wider good. That is, in any case, the ideal, and though Virgil does not take ideal uncritically or naively, he takes it with all the seriousness in his being. Aeneas, in short, is a man on a mission, and a mission bestowed upon him by the gods, not just by his mother Venus, the purported ancestor of Julius Caesar himself, but by Jove or Jupiter, the father and ruler of the gods.

J. Compared with "bright Achilles," and even more, compared with "many-minded Odysseus," Aeneas seems a bit plodding and colorless. His characteristic epithet is "*pius* Aeneas," and "pious Aeneas" doesn't have quite the martial ring of "man-killing Achilles." To be sure, Virgil's *pius* does not exactly mean "pious" in our own sense, a virtue we might consider more appropriate to an Ursuline contemplative or a Baptist preacher than to a king and warrior. *Pius* to Virgil means above all something more like "respectful" or "devoted to duty," and devotion to duty is the hallmark of Aeneas's character. He is devoted, in short, in the widest sense, to what the Greeks would have called *nomos*, to the way things are supposed to be, and he acts accordingly.

K. In this sense, then, Virgil corrects—in distinctly Roman terms—what he perceives as the flaws and weaknesses in the Greek conception of heroism and right behavior. Greek culture, from a Roman perspective, and especially Athenian culture, is—or was—fundamentally individualistic. One seeks and achieves *arete* on an individual basis. (Here, as elsewhere, Sparta is in many respects an exception.) Even wisdom one characteristically achieves on an individual basis. One happy result of

this orientation was the Greeks' and especially the Athenians' staggering creativity in virtually all fields that they attempted. This the Romans appreciatively recognized. But that creativity came at a price. The Greeks were far less good at cooperating. On the day before their great triumph at Salamis, the Greeks were engaged in fierce and, often enough, underhanded negotiations that almost led them to disaster. And during the Peloponnesian war, disaster came. The Romans, by contrast, were unmatched in wide-ranging communal effort and cooperation. In the splendid Roman legions—which by the way were the greatest source of new citizens, since veterans were as a matter of course granted citizenship on their discharge, whatever their original background—individual heroics were discouraged. The point was not to achieve isolated and spectacular feats of arms, which is precisely the point in *The Iliad*. The point was to work together as a deadly, responsive, and well-trained unit, well-prepared, well-supplied, slow and steady, and almost invariably victorious, even when, as occasionally happened, they were led by commanders a long way from the first rank in skill. The virtues of the Romans were, from first to last, in large part the virtues of the army—persistence, resilience, discipline and self-control, good organization, careful planning, devotion to duty, and patience. Those are not virtues to stir hearts in the ordinary course of things. But they wear exceedingly well. The Romans built to last, and they lasted. And so, Aeneas can't be an Achilles, can't even be an Odysseus. His duty will not allow it, and his duty always comes first. Achilles prays that the Greek host will suffer heavy losses after he has withdrawn from battle after Agamemnon has insulted him. The Greeks need to learn what he is worth, and if they purchase that knowledge at the cost of many lives, Achilles never gives the matter a thought. He has been insulted. That sort of behavior is absolutely inconceivable in the world of Aeneas. At every turn—well, almost at every turn, and when he turns wrong, he is corrected—Aeneas is thinking of what he is supposed to do, thinking of his mission, thinking of others, of his family, of his allies, of the people he leads, even of the people he fights. That is the difference. For Aeneas, like Moses, is a man called from above to found a new nation that will embody new values of worldwide importance. And like Moses, he completes his mission.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. In what ways is *The Aeneid* a consciously "Graeco-Roman" poem? Why does Virgil want to make it "Graeco-Roman," rather than just Roman?
2. In what sense can Caesar Augustus be considered the "off-stage" or unstated hero of *The Aeneid*? What similarities might be drawn between Aeneas and Augustus?

Suggested Reading

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1990.

———. *Eclogues*. Trans. Guy Lee. New York: Penguin USA, 1984.

———. *Georgics*. Trans. L.P. Wilkinson. New York: Penguin USA, 1983.

Other Books of Interest

Martindale, Charles. *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Lecture 11:
Virgil and Ovid

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Ovid's *The Metamorphoses.*

Introduction

We continue our discussion of *The Aeneid* and speak about Ovid.

I. *The Aeneid*: Paganism and Pessimism

A. Virgil's central story in *The Aeneid* is a story of triumph, the triumph of Aeneas, and, by implication, the triumph of Augustus and of Rome. For just as Aeneas is in Virgil's story the founder of Rome, so too Augustus is the re-founder of Rome, bringing to Rome peace and stability after generations of strife. Some critics have doubted, though, that Virgil is as unmixedly enthusiastic about what is termed the "Augustan settlement" as he appears at first glance to be. The "Augustan settlement" is, of course, the efforts of Augustus to reestablish good government and order, all the while conforming as best as he could to the forms of Republican government, even as he transformed it into something new—the Roman Empire in something which increasingly approached full panoply. And such critics have evidence to work with. I would myself interpret that evidence differently than they do; however, I do think that Virgil wholeheartedly celebrates Augustus and his work. There is certainly no intrinsic reason that a state poet must mistrust or resent his patrons. But the evidence remains. Triumphant as Virgil's narrative is, he never forgets what the triumphs of Aeneas and Augustus cost, and the triumphant course of Aeneas's journeys and battles take place within a context of deep and pervasive melancholy.

B. To try to figure out what that melancholy might mean if it is not meant more or less directly to raise questions about Augustus and his program, as I believe it is not, then we will have to take at least a brief look at Roman religion. In many respects it is not what we would be inclined to think, nor is it simply that the Romans more or less took over and renamed the traditional Greek gods for their own benefit. They did take over the Greek gods, but not only the Greek gods, and the position of those gods in Roman life was different from what it had most often been in Greece.

C. To paint in broad strokes, the Greeks were not a deeply pious people. It would be closer to the truth to call them a skeptical people. Even in Homer, the gods and goddesses are not taken with full seriousness. Homer tells amused and scandalous stories about them, and though they are powerful, they are not in any particularly meaningful sense of the term moral examples. One is wise, of course, not to offend them, and they demand sacrifices and respect, but other than that they are

deathless and blissfully unconcerned with the ordinary run of human moral life, other than to cheer on their human favorites. Thucydides more or less deliberately poses his history in resolutely secular terms, and Socrates and Plato alike are engaged in reconceiving the very notion of the divine. What deep piety the Greeks showed seems to have been centered not so much on the Olympians of myth as on the presumably older and more earthy gods whom they approached in the so-called "mysteries," like the famous Eleusinan Mysteries held at Eleusis near Athens that apparently promised to initiate a form of immortality.

D. The Romans, by contrast, were pious—think of Aeneas himself—but their piety took a form very different from anything we are used to. At the heart of traditional Roman religion were the *lares* and *penates*, household gods and ancestor spirits whose duty it was to oversee and to protect the fortunes of the family. The Romans, like the Greeks, saw the world as full of relatively small-scale local spirits—the Roman term is *genius loci*, the genius or spirit of the place—but the Romans seem to have taken them more seriously and taken care to propitiate them when they feared they might give offense. That general sense of small-scale divine powers more or less everywhere seems to have lain at the root of traditional Roman piety. The Greek gods did gain acceptance as part of the general Roman appropriation of things Greek, but the Romans once again did not appropriate only Greek gods. They were respectful of the gods of pretty much every region they went. Mystery religions of a variety of kinds gradually gained adherents at Rome. And there was always the state cult of official sacrifices, which were designed to ensure good relations between the Romans and the powers beyond, but which also functioned as a sort of civic pledge of allegiance, and their political role seems increasingly to have come to seem as important as, if not more important than, their religious role. (This is where early Christians often got themselves into trouble; refusal to participate seemed not so much impious as unpatriotic.) Except for at least nominal allegiance to the official cults, which was an act of civic duty, the Romans seemed not to care about what religions people chose to follow or what religious practices they pursued. Piety was deep and widespread in one sense or another. But there were lots of flavors to choose from.

E. It is no easy task to determine precisely where in this smorgasbord of offerings we should look for Virgil's allegiance. But he is clearly a man of deep religious sensibility, an *anima naturaliter Christiania* or "naturally Christian soul" as the thinkers of the Middle Ages would have it. His fundamental vision, though—and in this he was in tune with Roman religious sensibilities in nearly all their varieties—assumed a divine order at work in the world with real but limited control of things. This is, from our own point of view, as legatees in the religious realm above all of Hebrew thought, a very peculiar way of looking at things. Whatever our own religious beliefs, whether as Christians, as Jews, as atheists or skeptics, or something else, our attitude toward the possibility of divine control of things tends to be all or nothing. We tend to follow the Hebrew and Christian idea of a God in control of all things, or to reject

that idea and to assume that chance or strictly natural forces give rise to all that we see around us. As has been well observed, in our society at least, even those who reject religious beliefs have been affected by Hebrew and Christian thought at least to this extent—the God that is rejected is generally the Hebrew and Christian God, not, for instance, Thor, or Apollo, or Ishtar. Roman beliefs, and ancient paganism in general, saw things differently.

F. There was indeed divine order in the world, but it was incomplete, often contradictory—one god, for instance, working against others—and inconsistent. Divine order could be seen in some things, but other things more or less just happened. This is not a view we tend to share, but it does make a certain sense. That is the way that things often appear to be working—some of what happens seems to make sense, moral and otherwise, and some of what happens seems to make pretty much no sense at all. Traditional Roman belief seems to have taken that puzzling and varied flow at face value. That was the way things were.

G. Virgil crystallizes this sense of things in a beautiful and moving image in book III of *The Aeneid*. Aeneas is seeking guidance about how to proceed when his journey is completed by the leader of another band of Trojan refugees who happens to be priest and seer. (The Romans took augury and omens very seriously indeed, particularly the rather grisly practices of the *haruspex,* whose task it was to ascertain the future by examining the livers of sacrificed animals—a really unfavorable result could on occasion stop an army in its tracks to wait for more favorable omens.) Helenus, the seer, encourages Aeneas on arrival to consult the sibyl at Cumae, near modern Naples. But he adds a warning, which I will quote in Robert Fitzgerald's translation. On arrival at Cumae, Helenus tells Aeneas:

> You'll see a spellbound prophetess, who sings
> In her deep cave of destinies, confiding
> Symbols and words to leaves. Whatever verse
> She writes, the virgin puts each leaf in order
> Back in the cave; unshuffled they remain;
> But when a faint breeze through a door ajar
> Comes in to stir and scatter the light leaves,
> She never cares to catch them as they flutter
> Or restore them, or to join the verses;
> Visitors, unenlightened, turn away
> And hate the Sibyl's shrine. (3. 441–52)

There is, in other words, an overarching order at work in the world, a final coherence in the way things work. But it remains out of human reach, and despite our efforts, we can merely come to know it only in part. Indeed, our efforts to come to know it are likely to make things more confusing rather than less. And more—the Sibyl's leaves powerfully evoke something very much like the modern concept of "entropy,"

that is, the universal tendency for disorder to increase. Order takes effort, and the very structure of things in some sense works against this, and once the effort stops, disorder must inevitably increase.

H. That is Virgil's world. That is why, as he says at the very start of *The Aeneid*, it was "so hard and huge" a task "to found the Roman people" ("*tantae molis erat Romanem condere gentem*") (1.33). It took all the self-control and discipline Aeneas and his followers could muster, and, so Virgil implies, if that discipline is relaxed, chaos will inevitably come again. That sense of the fundamental recalcitrance of the world, that sense of all the inert forces, within and without, that we must tirelessly work against if we are to accomplish something worthwhile, leads Virgil to make two startling gestures at the end of both the Odyssean first half and Iliadic second half of *The Aeneid*.

I. In book VI of *The Aeneid*, the Cumaean Sibyl leads Aeneas on a journey to the underworld, where he meets the shade or spirit of his much-beloved father Anchises. Anchises, in a passage that we have already quoted, arguably the most important passage in *The Aeneid*, outlines for Aeneas the future mission and glory of Rome, beforehand acknowledging generously and freely the artistic, and even the intellectual, superiority of the Greeks. The Romans have a different calling. "Roman," says Anchises, "remember by your strength to rule / Earth's peoples, for your arts are to be these: / To pacify, to impose the rule of law, / To spare the conquered, battle down the proud" ("tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento / (haec tibi erunt artes) pacique imponere morem, / pacere subiectis et debellare superbos") (6. 851–54). That is, Virgil clearly believes, what Rome at her best is all about. But those ringing words are not the end of book VI.

J. The end of book VI oddly undercuts them. It runs as follows:

> There are two gates of Sleep, one said to be
> Of horn, whereby the true shades pass with ease,
> The other all white ivory agleam
> Without a flaw, and yet false dreams are sent
> Through this one by the ghosts to the upper world.
> Anchises now, his last instructions given,
> Took son and Sibyl there and let them go
> By the Ivory Gate. (6. 893-98)

What? By the ivory gate? By the gate of "false dreams"? I must confess, the first time that I read *The Aeneid*, I couldn't believe what I was reading here. I thought there had to have been some mistake. But no, that is what Virgil says. What could he possibly mean? One interpretation is that he is deliberately invalidating the fine words Anchises has just spoken. Augustus more or less made Virgil write *The Aeneid*, but poetic inspiration is free, and Virgil is here deliberately critiquing the ideals he has celebrated under duress. That is not the way I read it. Virgil had, I think, too acute a sense of what disorder costs to think that Augustus's

program was at the deepest level a mistake. But by the same token, he knew too what that program cost, and knew as well that no program, however worthy, can succeed completely or for all time. That is, I take it, the meaning of Aeneas's departure through the ivory gates.

K. Virgil makes an analogous gesture at the very end of *The Aeneid*. Leading the resistance against the Trojans has been the Latin hero Turnus, whom Virgil is at pains to make a largely sympathetic and admirable character. At the end, though, Aeneas defeats him, and what we might expect, at this point, is a glowing evocation of the merits and powers of Rome, just now coming to be as a result. That is not what we get. Instead, in what looks very much like a fit of temper, Aeneas violates one of the rules laid out by Anchises in book VI, and most emphatically does not spare Turnus, but instead kills him, defeated and suppliant though he is.

L. The very last words in *The Aeneid* describe the result: "Then all the body slackened in death's chill, / And with a groan for that indignity / His spirit fled into the gloom below" (12. 951–52). End of story. Once again, all that Aeneas seeks is worth seeking. But things are messy, and no human achievement can be utterly clean or lasting. For, as the most famous lines of all put it, "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" (1. 462). This is a notoriously difficult line to translate. Latin is, especially in Virgil's hands, a far more compact language than English, saying and implying a great deal in few words and little space. And in fact, no translation known to me gives the full resonance of the Latin. Here is a literal rendering: "There are tears for things, and mortal things touch the mind." Spelling out the implications, though, we get something a little different, more like this: "Built into the very structure of things is an unavoidable sadness and loss, and the mortality of things, the inevitable limitedness of things, touches the heart and shapes all that we do and all that we can do." Something like that. That sense is the constant counterweight to the triumphal story that Virgil tells, and it is the conjunction of sense and story that shapes *The Aeneid* throughout. The cost of Rome's birth is the destruction of Troy, and book II, in which Virgil describes Troy's final night, is harrowing. The cost of Rome's birth is Aeneas's final rejection and abandonment of Queen Dido of Carthage, who has treated Aeneas and his followers with consistent generosity and kindness and has indeed become Aeneas's lover. Aeneas himself feels the loss, but he has to fulfill his mission, and his loss is nothing to Dido's, who commits suicide in despair and swears eternal enmity between Rome and Carthage (Virgil, of course, has Hannibal in mind).

M. So is it all worth it? Well, yes, but no. Or no, but yes. Yes, the foundation of Rome and all the effort and discipline it took were unquestionably, most emphatically, worth it. But no, Rome and all that Rome represents were not and could not be permanent achievements, and the cost of even that level of achievement is sharp, severe, and ongoing. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, and that is that.

II. Ovid and the *Metamorphoses*

When we think of Rome, though, we don't just think of laws and legions. We think of lurid, self-indulgent excess, the gladiatorial games, elaborate, deliberately self-indulgent feasts, and a kind of heedless moral hollowness, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, to refer to the title of Gibbon's great work. And that is real too.

A. Ovid, Virgil's younger contemporary, even rival, spoke to these very different aspects of Roman sensibilities.

B. The very title of Ovid's great work tips his hand. He calls it the "changes," and the point of the title is precisely to answer the purposefulness and devotion to duty that characterizes Virgil's epic. You want to know what's going in the world, what really drives people's actions? Well, I'll give you a hint, says Ovid, it's not duty. It's sexual desire, the gleeful desire to "do it," as often as possible, in every possible way. Try to control that desire or subvert it, and it will win out every time—gods, humans, or animals, no matter. The *Metamorphoses*, accordingly, reads much more like a collection of stories than a straightforward, linear narrative. In a world governed by changes, there really are no grand linear narratives. There is just change.

C. None of this very much pleased Augustus, as might well be imagined, and in the year 8 CE, Ovid found himself in real trouble. Part of the trouble came from the tenor of his works—Augustus was listening after all, and Augustus was not amused. But that was not the whole problem. No one knows exactly what happened, but the most plausible guess is that Ovid somehow got himself implicated in the scandalous behavior of Augustus's daughter Julia. In any case, Ovid was packed off into exile on the shores of the Black Sea at a place called Tomis, which he absolutely loathed (imagine our screenwriter in the winter woods of Manitoba) and spent his time trying to get his exile rescinded, writing poems about how unhappy he was, and a little more happily, writing a bit about deep-sea fishing. None of it helped much. Ovid died in Tomis in 17 CE.

D. His great work nevertheless remained. Ovid had no ascertainable belief in the traditional Graeco-Roman gods, but he had a deep antiquarian interest in the traditional tales, the more salacious, on the whole, the better, and the *Metamorphoses* is accordingly far and away the greatest surviving collection of Greek and Roman myths, stories, and tales. Many of them have become an integral part of our cultural legacy. When, for example, Bottom the Weaver and his friends decide to mount a play to please Theseus and his court in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the story they choose to portray—the story of the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe—comes directly from Ovid's great collection. The musical *My Fair Lady* is a musical redo of George Bernard Shaw's earlier *Pygmalion*. And Pygmalion, in Ovid, is a young sculptor who falls in love with a statue he has made of a surpassingly beautiful young woman. He prays to Venus and his prayer is answered. He hopes only to find a woman who is like the statue he has made, but Venus proves

more generous than he dared hope. His very statue comes to life to love him.

E. Another surprising factor that has contributed to Ovid's legacy is the fact that throughout the Middle Ages, the *Metamorphoses* was regularly and extensively used as a school text. When one considers that medieval education lay almost entirely in the hands of the Church, the choice of Ovid as an elementary school text seems a little hard to explain. But there were reasons. For one, Ovid really is a superlative poet, and his Latin is considerably easier for students than the Latin of Virgil and *The Aeneid*. Every bit as important, though, medieval mythographers and scholars had a field day interpreting Ovid, and, however improbably, read his tales as elaborate allegories of Christian truth. So medieval students had the benefit of the stories and the simultaneous benefit of a Christian sermon as well. The result was that pretty much everyone who was educated at all had, for many centuries, at least some familiarity with Ovid. Ovid himself, whatever the disappointments of his later life, was well aware of literary merits of his works. He concludes the *Metamorphoses* with a final transformation—his works have made Ovid himself immortal. Here is his concluding prophecy in the A.D. Melville translation:

> Wherever through the lands beneath her sway
> The might of Rome extends, my words shall be
> Upon the lips of men. If truth at all
> Is established by poetic prophecy,
> My fame shall live to all eternity.

So far, so good.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. In what sense is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* an answer to Virgil's *Aeneid*?
2. Why did the works of Ovid displease Augustus?

Suggested Reading

Ovid. *The Metamorphoses*. Trans. A.D. Melville. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Ovid. *The Art of Love*. Trans. James Michie. New York: Random House, Inc., 2002.

———. *The Erotic Poems: The Amores, The Art of Love, Cures for Love, On Facial Treatment for Ladies*. Trans. Peter Green. New York: Penguin USA, 1983.

———. *Fasti*. Eds. R.D. Woodard and A.J. Boyle. New York: Penguin USA, 2000.

———. *Heroides*. Trans. Harold Isbell. New York: Penguin USA, 1990.

Lecture 12:
The Christian Bible: The Gospels

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Bible, Revised Standard Version).

Introduction

And now we turn to the Christian Bible, the foundation text of the religion that has gained more adherents than any other religion on earth, and the text venerated more than any other throughout the Christian West throughout its history. In addressing the Christian Bible, though, we do not entirely move beyond the orbit of Rome. The Christian Bible, once again, is written not in King James English, but in *koine* Greek, the language of the eastern Roman Empire, and every event the Christian Bible chronicles takes place in one sense or another within the Roman world. But it is the Roman world seen from a very different angle from that which we encounter in the works of either Virgil or Ovid. It is the Roman Empire seen from the margins, from the point of view of edgy, unsatisfied outsiders, Roman subjects, to be sure, but not for the most part Roman citizens, and not very happy Roman subjects. For the ancient Near East, from a Roman perspective, was the most troublesome part of the early empire, filled with contentious people who would not see reason and conform, but made a virtue of their difference, and in particular, of their unswerving allegiance to their unpicturable and jealous God. The Romans hardly knew what to make of them, so unlike anyone else they had encountered, and Roman rule sat uneasily in Judaea and in the turbulent provinces of Syria and Palestine.

I. Historical Context

The Roman Middle East was at the time of Jesus and his followers every bit as full of violence and turmoil as the Middle East today.

A. After the death of Alexander, the region eventually came under the control of the so-called Seleucid dynasty, Greek-speaking Macedonians who sought—from their perspective, as a humanitarian policy—to impose upon their subjects the manifest benefits of Greek culture. Who wouldn't want to be Greek if they could? Well, the Maccabees and the ensuing Hasmonean dynasty, for one. The trouble came to a head during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164/3 BCE).

B. In 167, Antiochus, tired of the customs of his wayward subjects, sought to abolish Jewish practices and to establish the cult of Olympian Zeus in the Temple itself. The result was a full-scale revolt, in which the Maccabees proved victorious, after which the Temple was triumphantly cleansed, an event commemorated in the celebration of Hannukah.

C. That did not end turbulence in the region, though. No set of rulers who were Greek in orientation could prove really acceptable in the long run, and the Greeks were eventually replaced by the Romans in the person of Pompey, who took Jerusalem in 63 CE. That did not much mend

matters, though the Romans did their best to offend as little as possible, ruling where they could indirectly through the agency of client kings like Herod. None of it helped very much. The Romans were aliens too, and aliens, if anything, more efficient and relentless than their Seleucid predecessors. The Romans, to be sure, were committed to not making trouble where there was no trouble. But there was always trouble.

D. In 4 BCE, for instance, Judas the Galilean and the Pharisee Saddok led a revolt, which was put down by the Romans under Varus (who would later come to grief among the Germans in the greatest military disaster Rome would suffer in six centuries, from the Punic Wars to the battle of Adrianople in 378 CE or the fall of Rome in 410 at the hands of Alaric the Goth). Roughly two thousand insurgents were crucified—the Romans reportedly ran out of wood and punished some on the walls of Jerusalem, amusing themselves by making them suffer in creative, unorthodox positions.

E. The Jewish population adopted several different strategies in response.

1. One response was simply to make the best of a bad situation by cooperating as was possible in a sort of damage-control approach. This was the course adopted, by and large, by the Temple priesthood and the Sadducees. They didn't want trouble, did their best to avoid it, and some of them did very well in the meantime.

2. The Pharisees adopted a different approach and, so far as I can tell, represented something close to the mainstream course of action. The Pharisees, on the whole, neither cooperated or rebelled. They simply went about their own affairs, remaining as faithful to the Law and the traditional teachings as they could.

3. And then there were the mysterious Essenes, who retired to the desert and cultivated an extreme, ascetic purity of their own. The teachings of John the Baptist were purportedly influenced by Essene doctrine, and his own mode of life, living in the desert, dressed in skins and eating grasshoppers, certainly echoes in its own quirky way the Essene emphasis on asceticism.

4. And then there were the Zealots, who rejected any compromise, and who were, in their murderous and self-sacrificing zeal, not unlike contemporary suicide bombers in sensibility. It was, to say the least, a volatile mix.

F. That was the context into which Jesus was born, about 6 BCE, I would argue (there was in March of that year a spectacular conjunction in Pisces that might well have persuaded astrologers to look for mighty events among the Jews), and that was the context in which his astonishingly short, roughly three-year preaching mission took place. His execution, when it came, was a direct result of the political situation. Anyone, however pacific and however mild, who claimed that the "Kingdom of God was at hand," who claimed, indeed, or so we are told, would not renounce, the claim of being "King of Jews," was from a Roman perspective a very dangerous political threat. And the punishment for political insurgents was the punishment reserved for slaves and designed not only to torment those

upon whom it was inflicted, but to serve as a grisly and unmistakable deterrent to those who contemplated taking up revolt themselves. Those who were crucified—flogged, humiliated, and stripped stark naked—ordinarily took about three days to die, to die in a very public place surrounded by scornful and mocking crowds. And their bodies were characteristically left to be scavenged and ultimately to rot where they stood. Roman retribution was not gentle, relatively humane as their rule might be.

G. In any event, despite their efforts, the Romans proved unable to keep the situation in hand. In the summer of 66 CE, a really big revolt broke out, and it took Vespasian and his son Titus four years and more to subdue it. In 70, Titus took Jerusalem and burned the Temple, and even then the Zealot stronghold at Masada near the Dead Sea held out for three more years, only falling in 73 when on the verge of the final Roman assault, the defenders chose to commit mass suicide rather than to submit. And even then turmoil continued.

H. In 132, yet another revolt broke out under Simeon Ben Koseba or Bar Kokeba (the son of the Star). This too the Romans suppressed, and again it wasn't easy. By 134, when it was over, the Romans decided they had had enough. The Temple was made into a temple devoted to Jupiter and the emperor Hadrian, and Jews were forbidden to live in what had become the Roman provinces of Syria and Palestine. Those who remained scattered empire-wide and indeed, beyond to the east, with an especially large settlement in Alexandria. The diaspora had begun, only to end almost two full millennia later.

II. The Composition of the Gospels

This is the context in which the Gospels were composed, and their composition is a complicated story.

A. The Gospels seem to have been written as the eyewitnesses to Jesus' mission began to die off, about a generation after his death, and as his followers firmly believed, his resurrection. As far as can be told, in the early days, they felt no particular need for writing, since Jesus' second coming was expected to take place at any time, very much sooner rather than later. By the 50s or 60s, though, this expectation began to fade, or at the very least, to be reconsidered, and Jesus' followers began to gather accounts of his sayings and his mission.

B. The widely accepted account of relationships between the Gospels, like that of the various strata to be found in the Torah, is in large part the legacy of nineteenth-century German scholarship, and these relationships remain very much a subject of scholarly contention. Traditional Catholic teaching had always assumed that Matthew was the earliest Gospel. That is why Matthew customarily appears first in Christian Bibles. And some Catholic scholars still maintain that a lost Aramaic version of Matthew was older than any surviving Greek Gospel. Aramaic was the day-to-day language of the common people of Judaea, who spoke Greek when they could and when they had to, but spoke Aramaic among themselves. Aramaic was, presumably, the native language of

Jesus himself, though he knew Hebrew as well, and most likely knew Greek too.

C. Matthew, more than the other Gospels, is directed toward a Jewish audience—witness its repeated emphasis on the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, which would be meaningless to an audience not well versed in the Hebrew scriptures. Be that as it may, however, by now near-universal consensus, the earliest of the Gospels as we have them in Greek is Mark. The date of the four Gospels is a particularly vexatious topic, but somewhere around the mid-60s is not far from a consensus choice for Mark. Mark is the shortest and sparest of the Gospels, short on the parables we find in Luke and the arguments from prophecy that we find in Matthew. Nevertheless, Mark, Matthew, and Luke are clearly related. They are full of parallel passages, which on a contemporary reading reveal where the writers of Matthew and Luke were more or less directly working from Mark. That is why these three are commonly called the "synoptic" Gospels. One can, so to speak, read them in many places with a "single eye," because they say pretty much the same thing.

D. Luke's Gospel differs from Mark and Matthew in several significant respects. First of all, it is the first half of a larger work. Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, stems from the hand of the same writer. And Luke includes a lot of material in his Gospel that does not appear in either Mark or Matthew. His is the fullest version of the so-called "infancy narratives," which will be familiar to many at least from regular readings at Christmas time. And Luke is the only source for many of the most beloved parables, the prodigal son and the good Samaritan, among others. Again, and unlike Matthew, Luke writes with a predominantly gentile audience in mind—that is to say, he writes for an audience of Greeks or of non-Jews, and couches his arguments accordingly. Both Matthew and Luke seem to draw upon a lost source unknown to or unused by Mark, the so-called "*Quelle*" or "source," which appears to have been not a narrative of Jesus' life and mission, but rather a collection of Jesus' sayings.

E. Finally, the Gospel of John, about which there is most dispute, with regard to dating and otherwise—seems to draw from traditions that are in substantial measure different from those employed by any of the synoptic writers, though John shows at least a few affinities with Luke. Most scholars have considered John the latest of the Gospels, though here too there is no agreement. Some have argued for an Essene influence in John. Others disagree. What is clear, though, from all perspectives, is that the Christ of John is a more thoroughly "theologized" figure than the Christ we meet in the other Gospels. That is why the Gospel of John is especially beloved of evangelical protestants. In John, and in John alone, do we hear that Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (14.6).

F. There were, by the way, other Gospels that did not make it into New Testament canon, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and others, which are much studied by scholars interested in the early history of what they often term the "Jesus movement." All these perspectives in view, though, we can make several broad statements that apply to all of

the Gospels, and indeed, in one sense or another, to all of the writings included in the Christian Bible. In a way curiously analogous to the way in which Virgil draws upon and rethinks Homer, the early Christian writers draw upon and seek to reconceptualize Hebrew tradition. And in doing so, they tend to make two characteristic gestures. They seek to interiorize and to universalize—that is to say, they tend to focus not so much upon what people do as on what they think and who they are, and rather than focusing on a chosen people, they tend to make the claim that their teaching applies to all people, to Jew and gentile alike.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the differences between the Christian Bible and Jewish Torah?
2. How were books selected for inclusion in the Christian Bible?

Suggested Reading

The Revised Standard Version Holy Bible with Apocrypha. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Bloom, Harold, and David Rosenberg. *The Book of J*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990. (David Rosenberg's translations of the J portions of the Torah with Harold Bloom's interpretive commentary.)

Hauer, Christian E., and William A. Young. *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey into Three Worlds*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001.

McGrath, Alister. *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*. New York: Anchor Books, 2001.

Lecture 13:
The Christian Bible:
The Diaspora and St. Paul

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read *The Epistle to the Romans.*

Introduction

The Gospel accounts, varied as they are, at a minimum tell us about two things, about Jesus' life and mission, focusing especially on what is called "the Passion," his last days, and about what he taught.

I. The Gospel Accounts

A. Matthew and Luke, though not Mark and John, also contain "infancy narratives," and, much beloved and familiar as they may be, they are interesting in their function. Their purpose is theological, to suggest that Jesus, from the very outset, from the time of his birth, was the chosen one, the Messiah or even the Son of God. Matthew is, characteristically, particularly concerned to demonstrate that Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of prophecy, and in service of this end he quotes Isaiah, Micah, Numbers, and Jeremiah in the first two books of his account. It is Luke alone who provides an account of the Annunciation, demonstrating that from his very conception Jesus was to be "called the Son of the Most High" (1:32).

B. And both Luke and Matthew provide for us genealogies that are interesting on several counts. For one thing, they differ in detail, and for another, they lead not to Mary, as we might expect, but rather to Joseph, who, we are told, is in a biological sense not Jesus' father at all. The point, though, is the same in both cases, to establish that Jesus is of the House of David, and hence a legitimate candidate as Messiah.

C. All four gospels devote considerable attention to Jesus' teaching mission, though here too their emphases differ to some extent. Matthew and Luke alike contain the famous Sermon on the Mount, as influential as any teaching in the Christian Bible, which systematically inverts conventional worldly expectations as to what constitutes happiness and blessedness. To follow Matthew, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." And blessed "are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3–5, 11). And Matthew goes further, radically interiorizing the notion of righteousness and raising it to an almost impossible absolute standard. You have heard it said, "You shall not kill." But "I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (5:21–22). "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (5:27–28). And the most far-reaching, "Do not

resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:39). Indeed, you must "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44). This is a new standard of conduct, profoundly counterintuitive, and profoundly influential in its moral example, if not consistently, indeed—it must be admitted, not even close to consistently—in practice.

D. The famous parables in Luke elsewhere work toward the same end. The good Samaritan counsels universal benevolence and care (Luke 10:29–37). The prodigal son speaks of rejoicing forgiveness, no matter what (Luke 15:11–32). And the "pearl of great price" speaks of the kingdom of heaven, for which we should sell all that we have (Matt 14:45–46).

E. What, though, is the kingdom of heaven? That is a question upon which the Gospels are not consistently or entirely clear. Is it a totally new and more intimate relation to God in the here and now, which will enable us not only to live out, but joyously to live out the seemingly impossible counsels proposed for us in the Sermon on the Mount? Is it the coming of the Messiah? Is it a joyful and endless afterlife in heaven? Or is it all of the above? The most likely interpretation seems to be the last, but the disciples themselves seem to have been puzzled, and interpretations continue to this day.

F. The Passion narratives clarify things, and the Passion narratives conclude all four of the canonical gospels with accounts of Jesus' preaching in Jerusalem and of his subsequent trial and death. Thereafter, though, the accounts diverge, and diverge in surprising ways. Scholars maintain that the earliest versions of the Gospel of Mark ended simply with an empty tomb. The body of Jesus was gone. All four Gospels as we have them, though, chronicle a series of resurrection appearances, and what is surprising is that each of them gives a significantly different set of accounts. This is distinctly odd, since the resurrection is the theological centerpiece of the central Christian claims. And yet, we hear different things. The famous appearance on the road to Emmaus appears only in Luke (24:13–35). And according to Luke, the first to the tomb were "Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them" (24:10). According to Matthew, it was only Mary Magdalene and Mary (28:1). According to Mark, it is Mary, Mary, and Salome (16:1). According to John, who gives the most elaborate account, it was Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the disciple "Jesus loved," that is, John (20:1–2). And only in John do we get the account of "doubting" Thomas (20:24–29). All this would be more disturbing than it is were it not for one thing: it is almost impossible to maintain the argument that, deceived or no, the disciples themselves did not believe that in one sense or another the resurrection had truly occurred. Otherwise their fortitude and later actions become very difficult indeed to explain.

G. In any case, by the time of John, we can see the beginnings of a process that would go on for centuries to come. The synoptic Gospels at least are not philosophical documents. They give an account of Jesus' life and resurrection, they report for us Jesus' words, and there the matter rests. In John, and particularly in the so-called "prologue" to

John, we begin to get something different. John begins with the statement "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). The English translation is a little misleading. The original Greek has wider implications. It runs *En arche en ho logos, kai ho logos en pros ton theon, kai theos en ho logos*. The keywords here are "*arche"* and "*logos,"* which suggest in this context at least not so much "beginning" and "word," as "fundamental origin of things" and "overarching order." The logos is, in short, something, or someone, not much different from the Platonic form of all forms. And then comes an utterly un-Platonic statement, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" as a human being. What we see here is the beginning of a process of reconceptualization that would interpret the events chronicled in the gospels in increasingly philosophical, and generally Platonic, terms. That is the origin of the Christian philosophy that would dominate the Middle Ages and would form the philosophical groundwork from which Renaissance and modern thought would stem.

II. Saint Paul

The Christian Bible, of course, does not consist only of the Gospels. Almost equally important, and for the most part earlier—Thessalonians, for instance, is said to date from not long after 50—are the letters of the apostle Paul.

A. Paul, or to give him his pre-conversion name, Saul, was born some time between the years 5 and 10 CE in the Jewish community at Tarsus, on the Mediterranean shore of what is now modern Turkey. He was a Pharisee and as a youth he was fortunate enough to study with the great teacher Gamaliel and seems to have been, from the very outset—pre-conversion and post-conversion alike—a notably pious and intense young man. He was in the years immediately following the death and what the disciples believed to be the resurrection of Jesus a determined enemy of the Christians-to-be. Indeed, he is said to have been present at the death of the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, and to have set off shortly thereafter to check on the activities of the proto-Christian community in Damascus.

B. On the road to Damascus, though, something happened that cataclysmically changed young Saul's life. He believed that he had a vision of the resurrected Jesus, who asked him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9.4). Saul, or Paul, as we may now call him, emerged from his stupor a changed man, the most vigorous and energetic of the early Christian evangelists, working tirelessly on behalf of the believers he had once sought to suppress. He felt himself particularly called to take his mission to the gentiles, Greeks, and other non-Jewish peoples throughout the Mediterranean basin.

C. This calling raised certain difficulties, and Paul's resolution of those difficulties was to have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. For one thing, in the early days it was not clear to the surviving followers of Jesus that they were not Jews. They had virtually all been born and raised as Jews, and for the overwhelming most part, they thought of

themselves as Jews still. Not least among them the leader of the Jerusalem church-to-be itself, who was none other than James, "the brother of the Lord." (This designation inevitably raises questions. Christian commentators have generally sought to argue that "brother" here is a "semiticism" meaning not necessarily "brother" but "relative." This is an argument that I would prefer to finesse and will only comment that James's prestige in Jerusalem seems unmistakably to have derived in large part from his close family connection to Jesus himself.)

D. None of this need to have raised insuperable problems save for the fact that Jewish followers of Jesus for the most part followed the Law, and following the Law, for Paul's gentile converts, posed certain obvious difficulties. The Jewish diaspora, very extensive already even before the destruction of Jerusalem, was filled with what were called "God-fearers," that is to say, gentiles who admired Jewish culture, particularly the monotheism and high ethical standards that were characteristic of Jewish life, and who often attended what were already synagogue services, but who ordinarily balked at becoming Jews full-scale. I suspect that Virgil himself may have had some little knowledge of Hebrew belief. The great disincentive against going the whole way and converting, for men at least, was circumcision, not an operation to be undertaken lightly in adulthood in a world without either anaesthetics or antibiotics, though there were other lesser problems too.

E. As Paul reflected on these difficulties, it seemed to him that what mattered to his gentile converts was not conformity to what he came to term "the letter of the law," but rather conformity "to the spirit." Further reflection suggested the idea that what finally mattered was not conformity to the law, or "works," but rather belief in the saving mission of Christ, who in his resurrection had paid the long-standing debt of Adam and freed humankind from sin once and for all. What was needed was not works—no one could perfectly conform to what was demanded in any case, a subject upon which Paul, as a one-time scrupulously observant Pharisee, was perhaps in a position to speak from firsthand experience. What was needed was faith that Christ had paid all debts and redeemed all deficiencies.

F. But this reading of the situation in turn raised difficulties of its own. If faith was finally what mattered, then why had God given humans the Law? Paul had an answer. God had given the Law to humans precisely in order to reveal to them their congenital inability to fulfill it, to show to humans firsthand their sinfulness and their need for divine salvation. In formulating these ideas, Paul departed from Judaism and he took his followers with him, in some sense founding institutional Christianity in the process.

G. The Jerusalem community, meanwhile, went its own quite different way. And so perhaps things might have remained, if not for the devastating Jewish War of 66–70, which wiped out the Jerusalem community and left Paul and his followers in the field. They triumphed and more or less became the Church, as the few remaining Jewish Christian communities scattered in small numbers throughout the East gradually declined.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

Why does St. Paul value faith above conformity to the Law?

Suggested Reading

The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, College Edition. Eds. Michael D. Coogan, Carol A. Newsom, et al. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Brown, Raymond Edward. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Robertson, A.T. *A Harmony of the Gospels*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1932.

Lecture 14:
Plotinus, St. Augustine:
The End of Antiquity and the Medieval Synthesis

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .
Read Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

Introduction

Which brings us to our final lecture, and with it, to the end of antiquity.

How the story ends.

I. In Christianity we see already a sort of fusion of Hebrew, Greek, and Roman thought, and increasingly so as time passed. And meanwhile, the Roman Empire continued apace, through its high point of peace and prosperity under the so-called "four good emperors": Trajan, who ruled from 98 to 117, under whose rule the Roman Empire reached its greatest territorial extent; his hand-picked and exceedingly able successor Hadrian, who ruled from 117 to 138; then Antoninus Pius, who ruled from 138 to 161; and finally Marcus Aurelius, who ruled from 161 to 180. Under their rule, the celebrated eighteenth-century British historian, Edward Gibbon (d. 1794), proclaimed humanity had on the whole enjoyed greater happiness than at any time before or since.

II. And it was under Roman rule, though a bit later, that the great Greek-speaking philosopher Plotinus, born in Alexandria, made of ancient philosophy something approaching a single, coherent system, reconciling Plato and Aristotle with the emphasis on Plato. In the process, he formulated the "neo-Platonism" that gave to paganism the intellectual sinew to resist the intellectual onslaught of Christian teaching, and which would, in Christian guise, dominate Western thought for many centuries to come. Indeed, Christian or pagan, neo-Platonism continues to gain sympathizers and adherents to this day. (Though it perhaps needs to be said that Plotinus's great work, the *Enneads*, is by no means an easy read. Plotinus's intellectual system is a masterpiece of lucidity and coherence. His writings themselves, to put it charitably, are less clear.)

III. As time passed, though, the Roman Empire came increasingly under threat. Gibbon thought that a main reason was the slow triumph of Christianity, which redirected people's energies from the civic present to the world to come. Others have advanced different culprits, ranging in plausibility from a declining birthrate among the Roman elite, to ongoing lead poisoning from lead sewer pipes, to financial collapse, to changing climate leading to increased pressure along the frontiers. Whatever else may have happened, the financial collapse and the ongoing pressure along the frontiers were real enough. The Romans had little problem in the south. The few inhabitants of the Sahara posed no significant difficulties, and they had little problem to the west, where the Atlantic ocean posed a formidable barrier. Even to the east there

were few problems. The Romans had long since worked out a workable *modus vivendi* with their Eastern counterparts. To the north, though, things were different, where for whatever reason, northern, predominantly German, groups increasingly pressed against the frontiers. Many were allowed to settle in Roman territory. Many were enrolled in the Roman legions.

IV. By the time of Diocletian (284–305), matters had clearly reached a crisis, and Diocletian resorted to desperate measures. He effectively divided the Empire into four sectors, ruled by two "Augusti" and two "Caesars" in hopes of providing top-rate military leadership wherever it was most needed, and resorted to a series of desperate and ultimately unsuccessful measures to stabilize the currency and put a stop to economic decline. It helped for a while, but not for long, and the decline continued apace.

V. In 312, one of the emperors in the West, named Constantine, defeated his rivals at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, before which he had reportedly seen a vision of the Cross and with it the legend "*in hoc signo vinces*," "in this sign you will conquer." Whether for that reason or not, the next year, in 313, Constantine in conjunction with the eastern emperor Licinius promulgated the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity throughout the empire.

VI. In 324, Constantine took on and defeated Licinius himself and became sole emperor in his own right. He moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium, which was renamed "the city of Constantine" or "Constantinople," now known as Istanbul. He also made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Even still, the decline continued. In 378 Valens, the Roman emperor in the East, was soundly defeated by the Goths at Adrianople, in the worst defeat suffered by Roman arms since Varus lost his legions to the Germans in the Teutoberger forest in 9 CE. The Goths, ominously enough, relied upon a sort of soldier whom the Romans found it difficult to match, heavily armored cavalry, the predecessors of what would later become knights. Matters in the less thickly settled and distinctly less prosperous West were even worse. The administrative apparatus, so long and so carefully cultivated, was slowly eroding and falling to pieces. As already noted, in 410, Alaric the Goth proved, shockingly, able to invade and ransack Rome herself. And still the invasions and incursions continued.

VII. The Germans themselves were under threat from Attila and the Huns, mounted warriors and anchors from Central Asia, and the last major Roman victory in the West was won by the Roman (or quasi-Roman) warlord Aetius, who, in 451, led a mixed Romano-Gallo-Germanic army to victory over the Huns at the battle of the Catulaunian Plains in what is now eastern France. The Huns shortly afterward disintegrated after the death of Attila, but the Germanic tribes most emphatically did not. The end came in the West—to the extent that any given point constitutes the end in such a painfully drawn-out process—in 476, when the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustus, was deposed. Within a few years, Italy was in the hands of Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who turned out, as matter of fact, to be not such a bad ruler, on the whole.

VIII. The last days of the West, though, however painful, were productive in a cultural sense. Philosophical Christianity, for the West at least (the Greek East is a different story), was established by the mind-numbingly brilliant St. Augustine (354–430), who over the course of his long career, systematically thought through Christianity in neo-Platonic terms and in the process bequeathed to his church a theology that endures to this day. He died in his native North Africa with the Vandals literally at the gates of his bishopric at the city of Hippo Reguis. Even after the Western Empire had fallen, Roman culture for a time continued, working on memory and on momentum. In 524, having fallen afoul of Theodoric, so far as can be told, for no particular fault of his own, but simply because of suspicion, bad information, and envious slander, Boethius, a Roman polymath and philosopher, wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while confined in prison awaiting execution on the charge of wishing to supplant Theodoric and to restore the rule of Roman senate. He was duly and brutally executed, but not before completing his work, which is a meditation on how to overcome bad fortune by concentrating on the internal virtues that no one can take away—and which incidentally proposes the most convincing argument, to my knowledge, ever advanced reconciling divine foreknowledge and free will.

IX. The *Consolation* was loved for centuries. Both King Alfred of England and Queen Elizabeth I took the trouble to translate it in their own hands, and it is still very much worth reading. It even helps a little if things are not going very well. Boethius was, in a sense, the last full-scale Roman intellectual. Before his fall he had devoted himself to translating Plato and Aristotle and to seeking on his own to reconcile their philosophical systems where they diverged. No one in the West for many centuries thereafter would be equipped to undertake such work.

X. A close contemporary of Boethius proved even more influential than he. St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547) was in a sense the last of the Romans, at least in the West.

XI. Benedict was born a Roman aristocrat, and in formulating the *Benedictine Rule*, the foundation text of Western monasticism, he reconceived and transmitted to posterity—in a monastic rather than a civic or a military context—many of the values and virtues that had served Rome so well and so long. Benedict was responding to the monastic impulse that had first taken root in Egypt and in the Greek-speaking East. But to his measured Roman sensibility, Eastern monasticism was subject to self-indulgence and excess. Egyptian monks were most often hermits, living alone in desert refuges, and were often given to spectacular—not to say competitive—feats of ascetic self-denial. All that Benedict found spiritually dubious and distasteful, and in the *Rule*, as the great historian of late antiquity, Peter Brown, has observed, Benedict did his best to discourage such excesses. Benedictine monks are to live in communities and are to live under strict, but reasonable discipline. They are to have enough to eat, enough time to sleep. They are to devote themselves to work and to prayer. Above all, they are under discipline, obliged to obey the Rule, and so it is to be hoped, the wise and benevolent command of their superiors. Roman military and civic virtues, in short, translated into an ecclesiastical context once again, to follow Peter Brown's shrewd observations.

XII. The system worked surpassingly well. So much so, in fact, that it has often been argued, that it was the *Benedictine Rule*, and the monastic communities that it governed, which more than any other factor ensured the survival of Roman culture—and for that matter, virtually all that we have gained from the world of classical antiquity, through the Middle Ages and beyond. It is true beyond question that we owe an immeasurable debt to the work of monastic *scriptoria*, which preserved and reproduced, generation after generation, the works of classical antiquity and of the early Christian theologians. Absent their efforts and the efforts of the Byzantines in the East and indeed, Muslim translators as well, we would have at our disposal the merest fraction of what we have.

XIII. In this sense, and indeed in others, the Church was the inheritor of Rome. After the collapse of the Western Empire, what continuity there was stemmed in very large part from the Church. Civic institutions simply collapsed. Ecclesiastical institutions, though under severe strain, did not collapse, and in time more or less took up the slack. In time this too led to problems. The later Middle Ages and the Renaissance saw widespread efforts to shake free from ecclesiastical influence. But in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Western Empire, there was no viable alternative.

XIV. The Eastern Empire, always more prosperous, outlasted the Western for almost a millennium to fall at last, in much truncated guise, to the Turks in 1453. Long before that, though, under the emperor Justinian (527–65), the Eastern empire made a real, though ephemeral, comeback, and left to East and West alike an enduring legacy in celebrated digest of Roman law, a project sponsored by Justinian himself, which remains, as we have noted, the foundation of the legal code throughout much of Europe.

XV. Little else remains to be told. Much of the old Empire was lost to Roman hegemony once and for all with the rise of Islam in the 600s, which within two generations conquered Egypt, the rest of North Africa, most of Spain, the Near East—and with it Jerusalem, Antioch, and Damascus—and what had been the Persian empire. Byzantium held on, but it too eventually became part of the Islamic world.

XVI. Meanwhile, in the West, a new culture was coming to birth, a culture colored deeply and irrevocably by the influence of the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, but a culture which for all that had its own distinctive character. We can watch it coming to birth by studying the high Middle Ages, by reading St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante, and the writers and thinkers who followed their lead. But that is another story, our own story in the end—and even still in our own world, we can recognize and value the contributions of our more distant cultural forebears, the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

In what senses are we all Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans still?

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